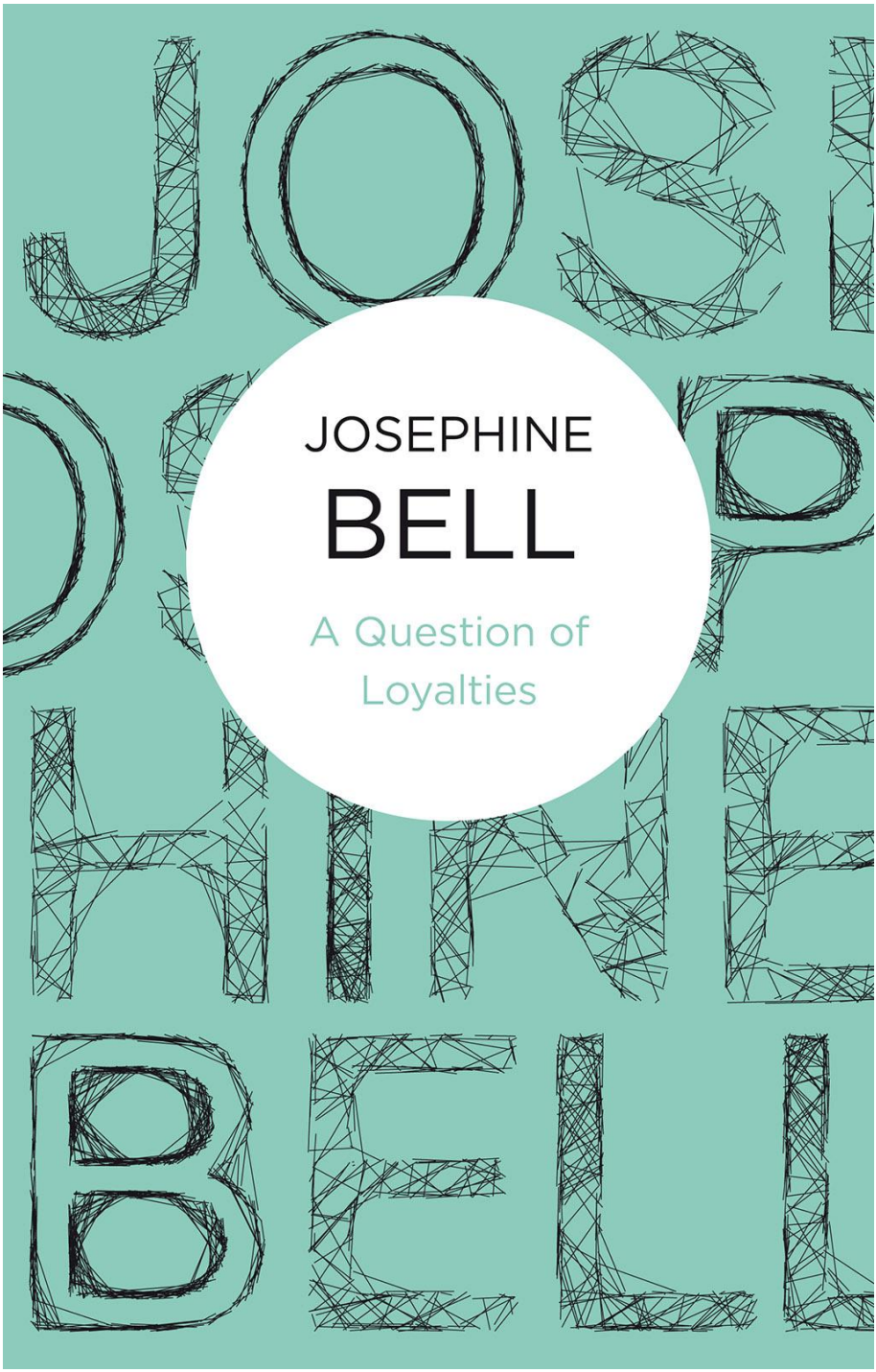
JOSEPHINE
BELL
A Question of
Loyalties

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Contents

Josephine Bell
Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One

Josephine Bell

A Question of Loyalties

Josephine Bell

Josephine Bell was born Doris Bell Collier in Manchester, England. Between 1910 and 1916 she studied at Godolphin School, then trained at Newnham College, Cambridge until 1919. At the University College Hospital in London she was granted M.R.C.S. and L.R.C.P. in 1922, and a M.B.B. S. in 1924.

Bell was a prolific author, writing forty-three novels and numerous uncollected short stories during a forty-five year period.

Many of her short stories appeared in the *London Evening Standard*. Using her pen name she wrote numerous detective novels beginning in 1936, and she was well-known for her medical mysteries. Her early books featured the fictional character Dr. David Wintringham who worked at Research Hospital in London as a junior assistant physician. She helped found the Crime Writers' Association in 1953 and served as chair during 1959–60.

Chapter One

The boys crept forward through the tangled undergrowth of a little coppice that had long since invaded the ruined lawns of Ashe.

There were six of them, three of a size with their young leader, one bigger and stronger than any, one smaller and thinner. The big boy, for all his size, came last showing the group, by his face his general discomfort and bewilderment, for his wits did not match his size. But he made no complaint and no sound but the result of his general clumsiness in kneeling upon breaking twigs, dragging himself from brambles, upsetting and knocking together stones in his path. It was, however, the little chap who complained aloud of similar hazards and consequent hurts.

'They have agreed the citadel, John,' he cried in desperation. 'Why do we go on? We are beaten, are we not?'

The three lads who moved in exact obedience to their leader turned their heads to growl abuse at him. But John, not even turning his head, spoke briefly in a low cutting voice.

'Silence, little coward! Or stay where you are, well out of sight. We go on to victory.'

It was a bold assertion, given with such absolute conviction that the rest of the group murmured their agreement, though they had no idea how such a result could be achieved. However, their leader, having reached the edge of the spinney, with a wide open straggle of tall weeds and uncut hay to hide them from the distant ruined wall, had stopped moving, spun round to lie facing them and began to whisper his plan of campaign.

The ruins were those of Ashe in the parish of Musbery, Devon, near the borders of Dorset. It was the home of young John's grandmother, Eleanor, Lady Drake, widow of Sir John Drake, a parliamentarian in the late Civil Wars. She had called for the protection of a Roundhead garrison at Ashe, when she felt herself to be in peril. But she was too late. Lord Powlett, eager royalist, with a troop of Irish soldiers, marched upon the place, burned down the house and drove out the lady, who took refuge

with friends in Lyme Regis, a stronghold of the Parliament.

Six years later, when Cromwell had established the Commonwealth, Lady Drake received compensation for Ashe. Most of the house was in ruins and there was not enough money to restore more than one wing of it. Lady Drake had by now been given the tenancy of a London house belonging to a rebel royalist. So she allowed the surviving wing of Ashe house to be occupied by her third daughter, Elizabeth, who had married a young royalist, Winston Churchill, son of a loyal lawyer John Churchill, whose estate in Somerset at Wootton Glanville, near Ashe, lay under suspicion.

This confusion of loyalties was not unusual in the Civil Wars. Country families were not all bigots; marriages of propinquity, of common sense, of equal or advantageous fortune, continued to be made regardless of high politics, regardless of the bitter, mortal struggle for ultimate power.

So the young Churchills had settled at Ashe, he to efface himself as best he might with the study and writing of books on history and heraldry, she to the prolific production of a large family. Their eldest child, a girl named Arabella, was born in 1648, the boy John in 1650. These two thrived, though many of the total of twelve births died in infancy, following the usual pattern of breeding in those days when sanitation was primitive and medical knowledge scarcely a step from total ignorance, total lack of understanding, total reliance upon ancient custom and superstition.

But the country air was pure and the land fertile. So humble folk out of the line of battles and armies and consequent pillage or destruction continued to grow their food in reasonable abundance and rear children who survived their difficult infancy. Those dreaded major ills, the plague and small pox, were not frequent visitors to the country villages. The village boys and the boys at Ashe were mostly strong and sturdy lads who knew and played together freely, their games very naturally based upon war, hitherto a real part of their young lives, their parents' fortunes and continuing conversations.

Young John gave his orders fluently and in swift short sentences. He had devised his plan a good hour previously, when frontal assault had failed and he had pulled back his troop into the shelter of the wood. He had worked out the detail as he

led the long damp uncomfortable crawl through the coppice.

'Mat and Hugh go forward with me. Walt, I leave you in charge of the rest. As soon as we leave you will cover our noise, if any, by beating the bushes, breaking branches, moving about. Make enough noise to give the enemy an idea we are all together still and waiting to take action.'

'Will they not attack us?' little George Churchill asked fearfully.

'Not at once. But I need to draw their attention to where they imagine we are gathered. We will not delay. We three will reach the ruins where the old cellar steps lie under a bed of nettles. If we get at them safely, we shall be under cover and will be hid till we can see how they be disposed.'

'And then?' the big boy Tom asked slowly, looking very doubtful.

John laughed quietly. 'Then we shall act as we may.'

'And we here?'

'Go on making the enemy regard you until you hear my voice ordering a charge. Then rush over the field and grapple with them.'

'But—but—' Walt was aghast. 'They outnumbered us before. Now we be three fewer. How—'

John struck him lightly on the shoulder.

'If we three succeed, they will be three fewer too, and those the leaders.'

Without another word John began to crawl away at the edge of the trees and after a few minutes he and his companions heard the party they had left begin in hesitant voices to play their part in the new attack. Clearly they had no confidence in the plan, but John had established his authority over them though he was no more than ten years old.

It was far from perfect, this plan, for the enemy was made up of village lads who knew very nearly as much about the ruins of Ashe as young Churchill himself. Also the games of warfare they were continually playing about the place made them very familiar with one another's ideas and methods. Of late some of the older lads had joined the village contingent. The home force, with the sequestered vicar's son and the three boys, one John's cousin on his father's side, the other two from the estate, had become well drilled, most fertile in ideas. They won too easily.

This was the first occasion when freshly recruited heavier stronger individuals, notably Will Layden, a farmer's son, on the village side, looked like achieving a victory, won in the conventional way, in straight attack, be weight of numbers.

But John, working his way through the copse to the one point where he could, unseen, outflank the enemy, was still in the ascendant. The village expected surrender. He had not openly surrendered, but had enticed them to believe he had done so. Now he could take them off their guard. His simple plan succeeded.

Not without moments of alarm, even danger. There were still some yards of open ground between the edge of the trees and the great clump of nettles that grew in the mouth of the ruined cellar steps. This gap must be crossed without attracting the attention of any watchers who by now should be peeping over the uneven wall of the courtyard that the village had captured.

Hesitating while his two supporters moved close behind him, ready for the dash across open ground, John chuckled quietly.

'I see no heads,' he whispered. 'No movement in the weeds above the stones. I warrant they be overcome by their success.'

The other two grinned at him, not venturing to speak.

'We will go separately. I lead. Hugh, count ten after I am gone, then follow, moving as I move. If they take me at once, do you both go back to the rest, tell them to wait for my surrender, but without noise. Mat, if Hugh and I be taken, go you back alone to the others. If not, wait till I call to you. So, wish me good fortune, in God's name.'

He said the last words as he had heard men speak them when starting upon a journey and his two young followers bowed their heads solemnly before sinking flat to the ground on their bellies, their chins on their clasped hands, their bright eyes searching forward between the tall grass stalks.

John shot up and away. He did not try to conceal his passage but leaped to make it as swift as he could, careful only to avoid tripping over stones or fallen wood and shaking his strong young legs free of entagling growth.

He reached the nettles. With arms folded before his face he plunged through them and was hurtling down the stone steps to the cellar before he had quite realised they were there. At the bottom, in semi-darkness, he pulled himself up, panting, half

astonished, half elated at the success of this vital move.

He was still looking about him when Hugh rolled down the steps to his feet, his face scarlet from nettle stings, tears pouring from his outraged eyes.

'I fell at the top step,' he panted indignantly. 'I brought down these accursed nettles with me. Damn them, they have my face on fire! I can scarce open my mouth or my eyes.'

He was indeed in a terrible state and John saw he could not be used for action of any kind until the worst of the nettle sting poison was overcome.

'It will pass,' he told his unhappy supporter. 'Stay here till I see how we find ourselves and locate the enemy positions and how we may best attack them. I will be back when I have a plan.'

'And if they take you?'

'As I gave orders before. Try to get back to Mat and with him to the rest.'

John crept away, leaving his friend to suffer a slow recovery from the scorching and pricking that racked him.

The cellar passage led in darkness in two directions, neither very safe from roof falls, but more stable at this time than in earlier years. Though the ruined house, burned and looted by the wild Irish troop under Lord Powlett, had afterwards, when the war moved right away from Ashe, been thoroughly searched by the local villagers, it soon gained a reputation for useless, unprofitable danger. One or two greedy searchers were maimed, one killed by a substantial roof fall. Thereafter folk only went to Ashe to steal building materials, a few bricks or tiles to improve their own dwellings, timbers that had not been reduced to charcoal, perhaps a dressed stone or two that took a yeoman's fancy for his own porch.

Lady Drake had restored the one sound wing of Ashe as soon as she considered it safe to leave Lyme when the siege there had ended. Afterwards, when she had installed her daughter Elizabeth there with the latter's suspect husband and his books, some sort of fencing was put up to keep the village out of property they had long considered common land. The fencing had no success and if the adult population of the village no longer scrounged and stole, the children still used the ruins as their playground, gradually wearing away and flattening walls,

breaking up the remaining windows and doors, making new paths where none had been before, until there was no longer an overhanging wall, an empty stairwell, a tottering chimney or any other hazard, but instead a rugged mass, rather like a steep hillside and indeed in places grassed over by the action of wind and rain, blown dropped seed, small beasts and birds, all helping the children in their endless activity.

John knew the map of these ruins by heart. He had known them all his life, growing up with their gradual relentless change. His father, who had watched his son's development with pride, had first ruled this part of the property out of bounds. But the rule was not obeyed and could not easily be enforced. Mrs. Churchill saw no harm in the small boy's limited exploration, nor did his nurse-maid, for it kept him occupied. Nor the villager who tended the limited garden, for it kept the child away from his territory.

Mr. Churchill himself began his son's education. A little later the village parson, who had been proscribed, continued it for the boy and for his younger brother as well as for his own sons, of whom Hugh was the third. Also for those of a neighbouring attorney who had been forced to retire from Axminster for Royalist views. The small literate society supported one another in cash and kind. A meagre, restricted life for these members of the gentry: a life of uncertainty, but of late years a life of growing hope.

John took the longer of the two dark passages. It led to a point below a former small courtyard where linen had been hung out to dry on lines. The floor of this yard had been breached at the centre, letting in light. Since it led to nowhere in particular he intended to cross the laundry, still roofed, but lit by the opening in the yard, and from it up what was now a grassy slope or bank, steep but solid, to the former great kitchens.

Having reached their open threshold John stopped to look about him. He had now, moving underground most of the way, travelled along the whole length of the ruined manor house. He expected to find the enemy installed in the former wide stable yard that lay outside the kitchens and sculleries.

He was right. Keeping under cover of half walls and jutting brick buttresses and corners, led by voices that grew clearer as

he moved, he came to a point where he could see through a slit at eye level.

Immediately satisfied, he turned away again, followed his former route back to his friend and slipped to the ground beside him. He explained the details of their further action. It was based on his original conception, he explained.

'To make a diversion while we seize Will and his immediguards, who at this moment, or rather who were when I saw them, reclining at their ease to the neglect of their followers and apart from them. I think you and I can secure Will if we act together. Mat must reinforce our main body and lead them. Go tell him so now and return at once. They have no lookouts yet hereabouts, have they?'

'I have seen none.'

'Go with all speed then and return. Join me at the main kitchen wall. Hurry!'

The boy's enthusiasm, his firey determination, were catching. Forgetful now of his nettled face, though it still throbbed and smarted, Hugh leaped off on his mission while John returned slowly through the cellar passage to his observation slit in the broken wall of the kitchen.

The plan succeeded. The surprise was complete; the diversion drew off the bulk of the enemy's forces. This left their leader and the only one of his guards who had stayed. They were pinned to the ground in a lightning attack and soon surrendered and were made captive. Hugh, the parson's son, was twelve years old at this time and sturdy, while John, though only ten, made up in furious energy and manual skill for his lack of size and weight. Moreover, the farmer's boy, Will, knew there was good treatment at the manor for prisoners of war taken in these games, with light ale, bread and cheese for both armies at the end of the day.

Casualties on this occasion were few and not serious. Under Mat's command the diversion went briskly. Since Will, assuming victory already won, had failed to set lookouts round his prize to observe any attempt at counterattack, Mat's party gained momentum as they rushed across the overgrown lawn from the wood. Their cries had already roused the village party, but the latter, with bloated confidence, simply set themselves to man the walls, waiting for orders to direct their next move.

No orders came, so as John expected, confusion followed. Anger roused the village lads, but too late. The other side elated, hit out bravely in the scuffles that followed. All except little George Churchill, who was only six and saw no point in exposing himself to no purpose. He took cover at the wall and stayed there till the fighting was over.

All the same the village side did not acknowledge defeat until John and Hugh led out their captured leaders and Will called to them that the battle was over and the victory, yet once more, had gone to the manor army.

'If ye have any man injured bring him to the house,' John ordered. 'Hugh, see to our own men. And you, sir,' he said with a formal bow to Will, 'must follow me to my father, who will declare what shall be done with you and your—'

'Lieutenant,' said Will, stoutly. 'We follow, captain.'

So, in all seriousness, some limping a little, one with a hand clasped to a darkening eye, another mopping a bloody nose, the two armies made their way to the back entrance of the standing wing, where a couple of Mr. Churchill's grooms took the boys to the pump in the stable yard and cleaned them up until they were fit to appear before the master.

John took his prisoner into the library. Mr. Churchill's manservant, a faithful survivor of those distant war years when he had first served his now donnish master, had prepared the way for their arrival.

'Master John hath won his battle again, sir, and begs leave to present his prisoner, Will Hayden, commander of the opposing forces.'

'Bring them in, Trubb,' Mr. Churchill ordered.

He left his desk and walking to the window looked out to where the ranks of youngsters were lined up; two parties of eight lads in each.

He did not turn when he heard Trubb usher in his son with the farmer's boy, but spoke over his shoulder.

'I see the two sides here have equal numbers. This was not so at the start, I believe.'

John did not hesitate.

'No, sir. But when I found my enemy had eight, I enlisted a further two. Forced them, sir. They deserted later.'

'But have returned now, I suppose, to enjoy the fruits of

victory. You agree to this? We hanged such in my day.'

'They do not deserve their reward, but it could encourage them in the future.'

'Or set a bad example, an envious example to the loyal troops.'

John was silent, abashed. His father had still not turned to look at him, nor praised him as he stood proudly, with his prisoner at his side.

But Mr. Churchill had much upon his mind, much that had occupied and excited him for some weeks and that had now come to a head in a most wonderful manner. He was not indifferent to this rough game and its result. He was simply uncertain whether he could turn it to good effect for his family and the village. Excitement over-came his long held discretion. He turned at last, his eyes filled with a light his young son had not seen there before.

'Follow me!' he ordered and led them out on to the terrace above the lawn where the boys stood waiting. He waved John and Will towards the ranks where they took their places in front of the others.

'Lads!' cried Mr. Churchill in a loud voice that brought Trubb to attention, remembering. 'Lads, you do well to practice a pretence of war, a skill whereby you set yourselves in train to defend your country. But not any longer in those factions and divisions that have done such grievous harm to the land and set one family against another, even among their own kin. Not any longer, because I have had news today that ends the strife, that promises peace throughout the land and a better life for us all.'

He glanced about him. As he had expected and as he had already arranged with his wife, the indoor staff, led by their lady, was already assembling behind him. Word had gone from the stable yard into the village and men's heads appeared above all the ruined walls while figures strode in from the copse and the fields.

'People of Musbery!' Mr. Churchill cried. 'All of you, young and old! Our King hath come back to us, to take up his heritage, to reign over this, his own native country! King Charles the Second hath landed at Dover and the people is mad with joy! God save the King!'

Then the people of Musbery and of Ashe raised their voices

and shouted after him, ‘God save the King!’

Chapter Two

This news, expressed with so much excited enthusiasm, quite extinguished the youngsters' announcement and in fact brought their intermittent campaigns to an end. But John Churchill never forgot his mastery of the event nor the comparative ease with which he achieved it.

Certainly he was surprised and disappointed at the time by his father's speech, but Mrs. Churchill, knowing her son better than his father did, and also being cautious in accepting what seemed to her a probably false rumour, hurried the combatants away from the terrace to the kitchens, where food and drink, plain but plentiful, soon restored their dampened spirits.

The village, too, received the news of the restoration with caution. They needed more assurance than that brought by an exhausted cavalier, who had ridden his horse and himself too hard in his eagerness to forestall any backsliding in this part of the country. Mr. Churchill might jump to the stars at the man's fulfilment of his dearest hope, repressed for so long. But the village folk were mainly indifferent, so long as armies did not occupy their fields and destroy their crops and consume their beasts. They were by no means ready for public celebrations.

Nevertheless, changes were coming and rapidly. As the Churchill children knew, their old grandfather, the lawyer John Churchill, had died a few months before. So his estate, Wootton Glanville, not far away, belonged now to their father; and if the great news was right, if Charles II did indeed now sit upon the throne, there was no longer any bar to the lawyer's son taking up his inheritance.

A day or two after the great announcement a more persuasive messenger bearing the same news arrived at Ashe. This was Lady Drake, Mr. Churchill's mother-in-law, the owner of the ruined manor house.

'I see you have my tidings already!' she exclaimed when he came out with a radiant face to take her down from her horse.

'Our King is home again,' he answered. 'We were brought the news of his landing at Dover. Three days since young Hereford

rode through, taking the tidings to the west. It was then a week old, he said.'

'Then he was more than three days premature,' she answered. 'We had it by sea no sooner than yestereve. I come from Lyme. I sent word of my intention. Did it not reach you?'

His answer was forestalled by his wife, who ran out to greet her mother.

'By horse?' she exclaimed, taking Lady Drake's arm to lead her into the house. 'Could not those friends of yours in Lyme supply a coach for you to ride in?'

'Indeed they offered it,' Lady Drake answered, laughing. 'But I refused. I am not so old I cannot still manage a quiet beast, and it is no great distance from here to Lyme – and a quieter ride on horseback than having my ancient bones shaken to bits in a coach dragged up and down these hills.'

When her mother was rested and refreshed Mrs. Churchill took her to the nurseries to see her grandchildren. As with most families at that time there were gaps in the ranks; those born very often did not survive their infancy. The eldest, Arabella, was now twelve years old, John was ten, George six, little Charles only two, but thriving. The latest child, apparently healthy at birth, had suffered a severe chest cold the winter before and now at little more than eight months old was again sickly, with a rash that had attacked many of the village infants.

'It seems prevalent each April and May,' Mrs. Churchill explained. 'The others had it in their early years, but recovered from it. After her bad chest at Christmas time she seems to suffer with coughing and wheezing and vomits her food, poor lamb.'

Lady Drake nodded, but said nothing. She saw that the hand of death was upon this child, too. Her daughter knew it but would not yet acknowledge the inevitable. Well, she had herself lost children. It was the Will of God. All must submit, Papists, Anglicans, Presbyterians and Quakers alike. No sect was favoured above another in the eyes of God, the Maker of all. Please God, she prayed inwardly, at the restoration now of the old order may the still warring sects at last agree to live together as one nation, sharing their joys and their more frequent griefs.

Later, sitting with her daughter below stairs again, Lady Drake said, 'Arabella is developed well. A pity she hath a plain face and a muddy complextion.'

‘She is at an awkward age,’ Mrs. Churchill answered, ready to defend her young as mothers always will, but secretly in full agreement over the child’s looks.

Lady Churchill persisted. ‘Nevertheless she will not be a beauty and seeing there is no fortune for her—’

‘That only time will show,’ Mrs. Churchill interrupted, annoyed afresh by this implied criticism of her husband. ‘Mr. Churchill will now recover his father’s estate, will he not? I know he intends we shall move to Wootton Glanville just as soon as we may.’

‘Ah,’ said Lady Drake. ‘Now that, even more than my intention to bring you the news from London, is what hath brought me here.’

‘Had we not better wait to discuss it until Mr. Churchill himself is with us?’

Lady Drake was forced to admit that was the way matters must proceed. She recognised her daughter’s simple determination, which indeed stemmed from her own character, she thought. It had led the girl to prefer their west country acquaintance’s son to any of those young parliamentarians Sir John Drake, with his puritan background, had favoured. Lawyer Churchill had never hidden his loyalty to the royalist cause, but he had managed to survive its defeat and also Winston’s active part in the war, with only partial sequestration and fines. Elizabeth Drake had endured with great fortitude, even with cheerfulness, all the discomfort and privation that followed her marriage. Winston, equally determined for the sake of his wife and children to give persecution no chance to destroy him, had seemingly turned himself wholly from physical exploits to the writing of history and the study of heraldry. Lady Drake, when he joined the two women, decided the time had come to express some admiration of his conduct.

‘Your patience, my son, looks to have its reward,’ she said, with an unusual show of feeling.

The evening meal had now been taken, the children had all retired to bed and the couple with their guest were sitting round a meagre and very smoky fire in Winston’s small library.

Lady Drake got up to move about before the shelves, taking out a book now and then.

‘Do you still know which of these volumes be yours and which

from that strange medley my people flung out on the grass to save from the fire?' she asked, pausing with a book in her hand. 'Sir John had much your interest in coats of arms and crests and such like.'

'I know them all, my lady,' Mr. Churchill told her, 'because I had few of my own when you allowed me to set up house here with Bet. Later my father made me presents of such books of his as he knew I coveted.'

'And such as you needed when you began the children's education,' Elizabeth reminded him.

'That too, I have scarcely the ability of a trained tutor, but with Dr. Offord's help we have done our best for Arabella, John and young George. They read and write and John has a smattering of Latin and Greek. Please God the schools may soon be open again and Anglican scholars like our poor priest may be restored to their cures in our towns and villages.'

'It will take time,' Lady Drake said, drily. 'You will not very easily destroy the Presbyterian dream of a Puritan England.'

He did not answer at once. Instead he got up from his chair to join her at the shelves. She handed him the book she was holding, afraid she had gone too far, seeing clearly there was already a new climate in the land. Or was it merely an old one, restored? Mr.

Churchill's words as he took the book from her and led her back to her seat beside the smoky fire, confirmed this.

'There hath never been a Presbyterian England,' he said, standing over her sternly. 'Sects abounding in the confusion of the so-called Commonwealth; a suspicion and so a hatred of the Roman persuasion, stemming from the Spanish perils in the great Queen Elizabeth's day. Yes, all that, I grant you. But under repression and beside the chaos of belief, a deep longing for freedom to worship God in natural happy simplicity, unfettered by Pope or Calvin.'

'Charles Stuart gives himself out as a practising and believing Anglican,' Mrs. Churchill added. 'Let us pray he shows tolerance to all people who strive to lead a Christian life.'

'Amen to that,' said Lady Drake.

She knew her feelings were mixed and always had been. She

had married into a parliamentarian family, had loved her husband and adopted his views. But she was born a Villiers, sister of the Duke of Buckingham and so very closely connected with the royalist cause, though she had never hitherto allowed herself to associate with it. This was not surprising, since it was the cavaliers who had destroyed Ashe. She knew she must restrain her continuing feeling of resentment. Her present visit to her daughter and son-in-law was intended to herald her final return to her own property.

Among the children upstairs the news grew in importance as they listened to the servants discussing it among themselves. John, George and little Charles shared a small room. Arabella lay with a nursemaid in another, the ailing infant was attended by the chief nurse, a middle-aged woman of experience whose wide knowledge of the terrors and tragedies of infancy had written deep lines of suffering about her firm mouth and jaw.

When the three boys were in bed, their candles blown out, their door shut, John said, 'So there is to be a king again. Trubb says he is to be brought from Holland by General Monk and placed on the throne.'

'General Monk is a parliament man, a Cromwell's army man!' George argued. 'Is it a trap to catch the King?'

'Will they cut off his head as they did to the Martyr?' little Charles asked in an awed voice.

'Both wrong,' John said. 'All the men are saying the Lord Cromwell ruled his army while he lived but his son could not do so. General Monk hath overruled all the other generals and the King will rule Monk when he comes.'

'Will there be fighting?' George asked nervously. He had never enjoyed the war games at Ashe. The thought of a repetition on a grown-up scale terrified him.

'You have not listened, fool,' John told him scornfully. 'It is to stop fighting and uprising that Monk is bringing in the King.'

'But they will not cut off his head,' Charles concluded, which made his brothers laugh and tell him to go to sleep in peace. No heads would fall and they would all soon go to live in their own house on their own land at Wootton Glanville.

And so it fell out. The young King met his welcome with great dignity and a very mature wariness. He had known both poverty and disillusion during his exile in France and the Low Countries.

He was determined never to suffer so again. He showed his people a serious simplicity of manner they had not expected. But it was genuine; no deception, no cunning. There were many sides to his complex nature, which had endured much and had learned to manage a great variety of circumstances, surmount deadly perils, extract enjoyment where many would have gleaned only bitterness. In spite of a reputation for license that had been fostered by Cromwell's men, the people were not at first made aware of it. His cold intelligence, that was always to lift him clear of disaster however great his folly, did so now to very good effect. The general talk was not of a brothel queen but of a future Queen of England.

So Charles came to his own and with the help and advice of his faithful Chancellor Hyde, now Earl of Clarendon, his Secretary of State, and others, including General Monk, created Earl of Albermarle, no sooner had he reached London than he called for the election of a new parliament to replace the old Rump. Government was to be by the people, elected in the boroughs, to form the House of Commons. The House of Lords was already again in being; only the Catholics were banned from both Houses. And so England sighed with relief and for the most part abandoned politics most thankfully.

Having moved back with his family into the house at Wootton Glanville Mr. Churchill found himself nominated for and presently voted into, the parliamentary seat for Weymouth. He took all this with admirable calmness, though the rest of his establishment was wild with excitement. Such an honour after so much neglect! Such publicity, such open praise after all those years of self-effacement! Mrs. Churchill made sure the news was well spread to her grander relations, notably the Duke of Buckingham, her uncle.

Lady Drake, too, was gratified by her son-in-law's return to public life. She hoped for further advancement for him. Back in London, still holding fast to the sequestered royalist's house she had been granted by the usurping power, she heard the Court gossip as early as any not immediately in the King's circle. She knew as soon as anyone who the King had noticed, had at once favoured and now pursued the beautiful Mrs. Palmer, who had been before her marriage Barbara Villiers, a cousin of her own through her distinguished brother.

So it was not altogether with surprise that she heard Winston Churchill was summoned to Whitehall to receive from the King the thanks and favours due to him for his many years of devoted service to the Crown.

Mr. Churchill received the message in London where he had gone to attend the House of Commons at Westminster. He was staying with Lady Drake and had brought his wife to town with him, but the children stayed at Wootton Glanville on this occasion. Partly this was an act of caution. The plague had surged into the City in a renewal of terror and death more devastating than for many years. It had delayed the King's coronation, it had driven many away from the capital. As the first years of the new reign passed it was to rage ever more terribly, until the Court took almost permanent refuge at Hampton Court with visits as far afield as Salisbury.

Mr. Churchill felt, as he dressed himself in his modest suit of black with a short black cloak lined with scarlet silk, and a flat black beaver hat, that this was the greatest moment of his life. Mrs. Churchill had not on this occasion been invited to the audience, but Lady Drake was able to take her to the Palace of Whitehall to mingle with the lower ranks of visitors to the Court.

They travelled to the Palace in a coach from the City and on arrival the two ladies were directed where to go and left to their own devices while a gentleman in waiting, whose name Mr. Churchill was given but in his excitement never remembered, took him in another direction, through corridors and galleries lined with pictures to an audience chamber in the royal apartments.

For a moment Mr. Churchill felt disappointed. He had expected to see the King in all his glory at the end of a great chamber, raised up on a dais, surrounded by a brilliant throng. Instead, he and his escort moved into a smallish ante-chamber and there stayed, exchanging casual and pointless remarks for some fifteen minutes, in company with similar couples similarly employed.

But at last the door opened and his name was called. He went forward, leaving his escort behind and there, at the far end of a room of moderate size, standing by one of the long windows through which a beam of sunlight shone upon white satin, silver

lace, sparkling jewels and the broad blue ribbon of the Garter, stood Charles, tall and straight, his black curling locks flowing over each shoulder, his black eyes shining a welcome.

'Approach, sir,' the King said, holding out a hand, palm downward. 'We are most pleased to see one who merits so great a measure of our regard.'

In a dream of wonder and joy Mr. Churchill did move forward, knelt and kissed the King's hand.

'Nay,' Charles said, as Churchill made a move to rise. 'We have a further business with a faithful friend. Look up sir!'

He did so and saw that the King now had his sword in his hand. It came down lightly upon either shoulder.

'Rise, Sir Winston Churchill,' Charles said, smiling broadly.

'Oh, your Majesty! Oh, Sire! I have not deserved—I cannot express—'

Overwhelmed as he was, the newly-made knight lost his head, seized and kissed the King's hand again, while tears stood in his eyes and his voice broke as his tongue stumbled. Shocked courtiers moved forward, but the King only laughed, waving them back. When Sir Winston was on his feet again, red with confusion now, Charles moved closer to the window and quite informally said, 'I have heard much of your prowess when you fought for my father and your discretion too, in not throwing away your life when the usurper held the seat of power. Nay—' for Churchill blushed a deeper red, thinking this sarcasm. 'Nay, I do not jest at your expense. I am still thanking God for the number of loyal souls who have welcomed my return. There is much employment for them. I have employment for you too, my friend.'

Turning round he went past Sir Winston to seat himself at the end of the room, then called several of those present by name and introduced the new knight to them. After that the audience came to an end, swiftly, painlessly, as he afterwards described it laughing, to Elizabeth, Lady Churchill.

'It was gracious, kind. There was no change in the kind face the King kept turned to me. A little movement of the hand, perhaps. A nod. A formal word, the royal 'we', all the gentlemen bowing, moving backwards to the door, me with them. Not so awkward, my love, as I would have feared had I not been in a happy dream.'

‘I am so very glad for you,’ his wife said, pressing his hand. She loved him dearly, but as the months went by had feared he might be passed over. There were so many loyal subjects in like case with Winston.

‘The title is well enough,’ Lady Drake said drily. ‘But the occupation has more importance, I think. You have had no word of it, yet?’

‘Not yet, my lady,’ Sir Winston said, his euphoria a little shaken. ‘But I have full trust in his Majesty,’ he added proudly. How could he doubt that magnificent, that resplendant figure.

Lady Drake made no answer. The Stuarts had always possessed this power over hearts, even that first James the Sixth of Scotland, who had sat on the English throne. So little merit, so great a moral turpitude. Already poor Mr. Palmer was to be created Earl of Castlemaine and rumour had it he accepted his own shame with that of his wife. Her puritan soul revolted at the thought.

Chapter Three

Before the end of that second summer of the new King's reign an appointment was made for Sir Winston. It took him to Ireland, where he worked for the Court of Claims, and where he and his family stayed for nearly three years. In many ways this was a blessing for the Churchill family. They missed the continued raging of the plague in London and many other parts of England. Ireland, though not free of it, suffered less.

In later life young John was often asked what his time in that country had been like. He would answer, using his military experience in North Africa for comparison, ''S faith! I had rather find myself among the black Berbers of Algiers or the Barbary pirates than set to rule the savages of that other island of ours! At least the African devils lived by their Moselm rule and obeyed their prophet Mohammed. But the Irish! They called themselves Catholics, Christians, and thought only how to seduce, cheat, bribe or kill the foreigner, particularly the English foreigner! No Christianity in their hearts or in their behaviour, but hatred and a heathen lust for blood.'

Young as he had been during this protracted visit to Ireland, John Churchill came back to England at fourteen with an enlarged view of the world and its terrors and a greater prejudice than ever against the Catholic faith. Not that his opinion upon religion was ever asked in the family or for that matter upon any other topic of importance. Lady Churchill, his mother, Puritan by upbringing, remained so by choice, though in a modified manner. She had followed a gentle understanding rule with her children, finding no interference from her husband, whose religious views were conventional Anglican, those of an enlightened scholar of his day.

The Churchills were all pleased to settle in London. By this time the plague had lessened its dire goings on in the capital, though not entirely so in the crowded slums of the City. John was entered at once at St. Paul's school, where Dr. Collet was in charge. Sir Winston had taught his son well, though the subjects in which he was already proficient were limited to the classical

languages, a firm knowledge of the Scriptures, a smattering of history as found in the classics and in mediaeval literature, and an unusual grasp of heraldry, Sir Winston's favourite study.

It was this subject of heraldry that had filled the latter's empty hours during the Commonwealth's long years. He had produced books that were published as innocent additions to general scholarship. These marked him out to the new King as someone exceptional as well as loyal; a combination of qualities Charles seldom missed, though he did not always act upon his knowledge.

In this case, however, he did act. First by augmenting the new knight's arms and crest, an act that delighted Sir Winston, and second by making him a member of the Royal Society, that body of distinguished scientists with Newton at the head, set up to promote and foster the growth of new ideas while discrediting superstition. Besides these honours the knight was given a minor post in the royal household as Clerk Controller of the Green Cloth, with an office in Whitehall.

Lady Churchill was enchanted by the change in the family fortunes. She had not enjoyed the Irish interlude but did understand it was an important step to higher things. Her patience and good management at Ashe and since then at Wootton Glanville, though they now spent little time there, were amply rewarded. She was received at Court, complimented by the King and, which was perhaps of even greater significance, recognised as kinswoman by Barbara Palmer, prime favourite of the monarch, acknowledged beauty, now Lady Castlemaine.

On the occasion of Lady Churchill's first audience Barbara was standing not far from the King as he received the deep curtseys of several ladies. Lady Castlemaine's wide gown of rich blue silk with a froth of delicate lace at neck and sleeves distinguished her at once by its elegant simplicity from the more elaborate dresses of the others; just as her jewels, for the most part gifts from Charles, glowed against her smooth white neck and arms with a richness of quality not reached by the ornaments of the rest. Too many heirlooms, too many family stones of great value, had been lost by the old aristocracy through death, theft, exile and fines. They had not yet been replaced.

But Charles had money at last. Less than he needed, far less than he wanted, but enough to begin to set up a Court that in

splendour, glittering beauty, gaiety and wit, became unrivalled save by the France of Louis XIV, now the greatest state in Europe.

So Charles, to his immense pleasure, was able to indulge his principal mistress, who in her turn found an added joy in showing favour to family connections. Lady Churchill found the lovely Lady Castlemaine at her side as she turned with another deep curtsey from her brief exchange of words with the young King.

'I think we have never met, my lady, though your ladyship's mother is a Villiers, as I am.'

'True, my lady,' answered Lady Churchill, a trifle stiffly, remembering the other was until very recently, plain Mrs. Palmer, as she herself had been plain Mrs. Churchill. But the Duke of Buckingham, though not present, stood between them. And it was the favour of the same King, whose bright black eyes swivelled now and then in their direction, that had raised them both from obscurity.

So Lady Churchill added, 'We are cousins of a sort, are we not?'

She smiled, inclined to laugh aloud at the absurdity of such a relationship; she middle-aged, faded, her court dress a made-over relic of her mother's early wardrobe, meant originally to be worn over a farthingale; Cousin Barbara young, very young, the long smooth oval of her clever face discreetly painted, her rubies and diamonds flashing and winking as she moved.

'Yes indeed, cousin,' agreed Lady Castlemaine.

'Country cousins,' added Lady Churchill, gaily. 'Buried in abandoned ruins for so many years I am quite bewildered by all this – splendour.'

If Lady Churchill was bewildered by the magnificence of the Court at Whitehall and by the friendliness of her Villiers cousin, Sir Winston wasted no time over enlightening her.

'My Lady Castlemaine hath indeed captured the King and will hold her grip upon him for many years in my opinion. She breeds by him too, much to her poor husband's shame.'

'His earldom is not sufficeint compensation?'

'It is not. Nor should it be. The world wonders how long he will endure his position. Already there are noisy quarrels. An it were me I would leave the brazen whore and go live where it

was not known.'

'Taking Cousin Barbara with you?'

Sir Winston laughed. 'Think you she would go?'

'I do not. Moreover I think the King would prevent it.'

'I wonder.' Sir Winston became serious. In Parliament a totally different notion of the King prevailed. There he was considered to be frivolous, careless, lazy at business, cruel upon occasion, less able in leadership than his brother, the Duke of York, newly appointed Lord High Admiral.

In Parliament the discussion was all of how to supply Charles with money for the defence of the realm. This referred mainly to the Navy, which had been developed during Cromwell's reign and did well under the Commonwealth. The Protector's Admiral Clarke won several encounters with the Dutch and took Spanish treasure ships in acts of open piracy. But now a new enterprise was on foot to besiege ports on the North African shores of the Mediterranean. Charles wanted to send an expedition to Tangier. This town had come to him as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza, his Portuguese Queen. The Earl of Sandwich, chief director of the Navy Office and now under the Duke's overall command, knew what was needed and knew that the Navy coffers were empty. Parliament must vote funds, collect them and hand them over.

Sir Winston, as M.P. for Weymouth, knew all there was to know of these matters. He knew what were the real needs of the nation's defenders and he knew too, in his office at Whitehall, much of the real expenditure and gross extravagance of the Court. He did not altogether agree with the sourer spirits in the House of Commons, who joined the King's extravagance wholly to his immoral life, his self-indulgence, his luxury, his lively patronage of the arts, the theatre, horse-racing, hunting, sailing in newly designed yachts built specially for his entertainment. True, all this cost money and Charles's personal income had vanished with the crown property and the crown revenues from the Customs, levied at the ports. And Sir Winston sympathised with the young King's desire for relaxed living, fit for the ruler of a potentially rich country that needed only peace and trade to rival those continental enemies who had held him in poverty and contempt for ten long years.

So Sir Winston spoke up for allowances without too many

crippling conditions attached and voted for them too. In his usual way he explained all his ideas and conclusions to his wife, who understood and sympathised with them. Her chief concern at this time, however, was with their eldest child, Arabella, who was now sixteen and inclined to be flirtatious. But she did not yet broach the subject of the girl's marriage to her father. She had no beauty, nor as yet any fortune; Lady Churchill foresaw difficulty in this direction.

In addition to his wife Sir Winston discussed parliamentary matters with his son, John. The boy was less interested in the members' views than in the subject of their debates and particularly in the Mediterranean project. Battles begun at sea and carried on to land had always fascinated him from hearing of them in ancient history. To find invasion being planned by his own countrymen against nations that in the far past had been the invaders of Europe enthralled him. He determined to find out all he could of that distant history and was able to satisfy himself to a very great extent before he left St. Paul's school when he was sixteen.

But he kept his interest very largely to himself. His masters noted his success in Latin and the intelligent grasp he showed of the military history of the Roman Empire from its steady rise to its slow fall.

'Your son will be a scholar,' Sir Winston was told by Dr. Collet. 'His grasp of high policy and the philosophy of government is quite remarkable. Hath he shown this capacity in childhood? It is so marked now that he is almost a man.'

'In childhood his chief activity was in fighting others of his kind,' his father answered.

'In play, yes, as all boys do.'

'I am not speaking of private quarrels, personal strife. John built up his army from friends and boys on the estate and led it against an enemy composed of lads from the village.'

Dr. Collet passed this over with a wave of the hand.

'Yes, yes, sir. Childish pranks, childish pranks. But serious study. In the lessons you gave him, did this historical bent ever show itself?'

'If it did I failed to notice it,' the knight said, determined not to support the schoolmaster in any easy conclusion.

'All the same his theology is poor.' Dr. Collet went on. 'Also

his knowledge of the scriptures. To become a true scholar he will have to take holy orders, so—'

'I have no wish to see my eldest son a divine,' Sir Winston objected, hoping to end the discussion. 'He will have Wootton Glanville to preserve and develop and that will be fit occupation for any gentleman.'

The interview ended at this point with the eminent schoolmaster offended but rescued by Lady Churchill's arrival with news of dinner just ready on the table. In the consumption of breast of veal, a couple of roast duck, some lobster claws and other delicacies, both men became affable again and parted with compliments on each side.

Nevertheless Sir Winston later that day confided Dr. Collet's views to his wife. John was leaving school in a few weeks' time, which event had led to the headmaster's visit. As far as Sir Winston was concerned he had no particular wish for his son to go on at once to Oxford as Dr. Collet had recommended. The boy's main intellectual interest might be in ancient history and the classical languages, but his favourite activities were, as ever, sporting and athletic. He had his own horse in his father's modest stable and with school friends had gone hunting in the woods north of the City about Highgate and Hampstead Heath. Sir Winston had taken him to Whitehall where he had watched the courtiers and even the King and his brother the Duke play tennis. He had walked with his parents in St. James's Park and had followed games of bowls or ninepins in the alleys and smooth lawns built for those purposes.

At about this time young Arabella Churchill, being now eighteen, received an unexpected mark of royal favour. She became a maid of honour to the Duchess of York.

This came about through Lady Churchill's attendance, sometimes accompanied by Arabella, at several court functions, more in the capacity of onlooker than any more intimate part in the formal proceedings. There were occasions when the King dined in public, at a table on a raised dais, with one or two companions or even alone. He was served on the knee by various young members of the aristocracy, with due ceremonial according to long-established customs, restored with the return of the monarchy. The public, sifted from among those found worthy of the occasion, watched from a discreet distance, near

enough to take note of the brilliance of dress and trappings, gold and silver flashing plate, sparkling glass, snowy linen; but too far away to intrude upon the royal conversation.

On one such evening, when the meal was over and the King had left the candlelit table hand in hand with Lady Castlemaine, the Duke and Duchess of York, who had eaten in company with Charles, walked away past the onlookers and the Duchess stopped as she was passing the Churchills, mother and daughter.

Both sank in deep curtseys as the Duchess turned towards them.

'Come, my lady,' she said. 'I have a word to speak to you—both.'

She moved on, a lady in waiting beckoned to the Churchills to follow her, and they found themselves passing into a small room where the Duchess had already placed herself upon a narrow couch.

'Be seated, my lady,' the Duchess said, pointing at the other end of the couch. Arabella, well trained at home, moved quietly to stand behind her mother.

Ann Hyde, wife of Prince James, Duke of York, was the daughter of the Chancellor, Earl Clarendon. She had been married, more by the King's command than James's wish, when it was disclosed that she was pregnant by the royal prince. In spite of her father's anger Charles had insisted his brother's child be made legitimate by marriage. Less in the cause of morality, since the young King's behaviour was more lax than his brother's, but in regard for the succession, since the King at that time had not yet found a wife.

The Duchess of York produced a son very soon after the marriage, but this infant and later on four more sons were born only to perish in infancy or early childhood following the unhappy pattern of the time. Only the two princesses, Mary and Anne, of all their mother's many offspring, survived into adult life.

'We have upon several occasions, including today, observed your ladyship's daughter, her carriage and behaviour in company,' the Duchess began. 'We find reason to compliment your ladyship upon their excellence.'

'Your Royal Highness is very kind,' Lady Churchill answered, bowing from the waist as she decided it was not necessary to get

up again to curtsey.

'That being so,' the Duchess went on. 'We have a wish to add her to the number of our maids of honour. We have the King's approval for this.'

Since Lady Churchill seemed to be too much overwhelmed by the unexpected honour to speak or move, Arabella stepped forward, made a very deep curtsey, remained upon one knee and bent her head to kiss the hand the Duchess stretched out to her.

'My Chamberlain will make all the necessary arrangements,' her Royal Highness said, beginning to rise. This brought Lady Churchill out of her astonishment, so that both she and Arabella were able to curtsey again with laudable steadiness as the Duchess took leave of them before she herself, supported by her ladies in waiting and her gentlemen in attendance, left the room.

Sir Winston received this news with undisguised pleasure.

'We are indeed blessed in receiving such favour from the Crown,' he said in an awed voice.

'Her Grace used the royal 'we' in conferring it,' Lady Churchill remarked. 'She who was but the daughter of the King's Minister of State when she yielded to the Prince.'

'Fie, for shame!' her husband chided. 'You speak treason! And coarse, vulgar treason at that! Would you deny our Arabella this promotion?'

'No, I would not.' Lady Churchill was emphatic. 'I love the poor child and fear for her, since her face will never be fair, though she dances gracefully, nor her fortune grow, besides, to make up for her lack of beauty.'

Sir Winston rallied to his daughter's defence.

'You are too hard upon the wench. She hath a kindly nature and an even temper, though perhaps a little indiscreet in her approach to men. With the opportunities before her now at Court she must surely find a husband of high degree and substance. I give thanks to God for His goodness to us and ours.'

Lady Churchill agreed, with reservations. The Duke's Court was less spectacular than the King's; the former Ann Hyde was at heart a very ordinary woman and now, it seemed, devoted to child-bearing in hope of supplying possible heirs to the throne. But Arabella, so lately arrived in London, so young, so ignorant? Well, her plain face should be her protection, poor lamb, until

she grew wise to the ways of this new, hotly pleasure-seeking, thoughtless, glittering world of a magnificence long sought, pursued and restored.

Chapter Four

The duchess of York's patronage did not end with Arabella's appointment as one of her maids of honour. The Duke too became aware of the existence of the Churchill family. They appeared at Court more frequently. Sir Winston was seen in the corridors of Whitehall, not only in his office. It was not very long before his eldest son, much to the latter's openly expressed satisfaction, escaped the rigours of academic Oxford and found himself, soon after he left St. Paul's school, appointed to be a page in the household of Prince James, Duke of York, Lord High Admiral of the Fleet. At this time Arabella had been in the service of the Duchess for about a year.

John was delighted with the appointment, for it seemed to him it must bring him into contact with the country's principal organ of defence and attack, the Royal Navy. And what better than to be in closer personal touch with the head of the Navy, to learn directly and by correct report the complicated rules and running of the Navy Office, whose officials were in continual contact with the Duke. Surely this gave him just what he sought. It bore out the knowledge of warfare he had studied and the ideas he had formed while at school.

The Churchills at this time had made their home in Westminster to be near Sir Winston's office as Clerk Comptroller of the Green Cloth. Also to be near their three children, now all in the service of the Royal brothers. brothers. For in addition to Arabella, maid of honour to the Duchess, and John, page in the household of the Duke, young George, through the kind offices of the Earl of Arlington, Secretary of State, had become a page to the Earl of Sandwich.

The circle of appointments and connections was close. Lord Sandwich was head of the executive of the Navy. Under the Duke it was Sandwich who ruled the Navy Office, directed its officials and was at all times duty bound to inform the Duke and through him the King, of the needs and therefore demands, of the Fleet. Young George and also his brother John, found themselves employed upon occasion in the role of messenger

upon the reciprocal business of their masters.

One day John, carrying a message from the Duke to the Earl of Sandwich, thought to be with the Court at Whitehall, came across Mr. Samuel Pepys, of the Navy Office, walking alone in one of the long galleries of the palace.

'Excuse me, sir,' John said politely. 'I believe you may be able to inform me of the whereabouts of my Lord of Sandwich.'

'And why do you think so?' Mr. Pepys asked, smiling.

He was flattered by the boy's assumption and had guessed where he came from. Also, having always a keen eye for beauty in human kind, he heartily approved of the young man's fresh good looks and very civil manners.

His question surprised John but did not disconcert him.

'Because, sir,' he answered. 'In attendance upon my master, His Highness, the Duke, I have upon occasion observed you in conference with him upon matters concerning the Fleet, where my Lord Sandwich——'

'Just so,' said Mr. Pepys, growing impatient with this over long explanation.

He hesitated before giving any real answer to the youth's question. The truth was he did not exactly know where Lord Sandwich was at that moment. He had expected to meet him in this gallery and he had not come. It appeared he could not be with the Duke since this young page had a written message from the latter.

'Just so,' he repeated, stalling for time and looking about him, while John waited respectfully.

A figure appeared in the gallery, approaching rapidly. Mr. Pepys moved to meet him. It was the Duke's secretary, William Coventry. John heard the newcomer say, 'My Lord decided to betake him straight to the Duke. He expects us both at St. James's.'

Mr. Pepys looked back over his shoulder.

'You heard?' he asked. 'You have your answer.'

And he walked away with Mr. Coventry, leaving John to go back to St. James's himself, his futile errand finished before it had well begun.

While he hesitated, seeing no point now in speed, his mission being over, he heard a gentle voice behind him inquiring if he had need of direction.

He turned sharply. A young man, apparently a little older than himself, had addressed him. He wore the uniform of the King's household.

'I thank you, sir,' John said with a polite bow. 'I am here upon an errand from the Duke, but it has reached an unexpected conclusion and I must therefore go back whence I came.'

'From His Highness I had already guessed by your appearance. I act in like manner for His Majesty.'

They exchanged names. The newcomer was Sidney Godolphin, member of a long established Cornish family of that name, page of honour for the last few years to Charles II and now aged, John guessed, considering the length of his service, to be twenty at least, though he did not look it, with his small features and very slim build.

They continued to talk. They exchanged views on all subjects that interested them, as young people will when they first meet a new congenial friend. So absorbed were they in their conversation that they did not notice the arrival of a small party approaching down the gallery. In fact their voices had risen with their mutual satisfaction in one another's company and their subject of conversation had sunk from the exchange of lofty views to lively, ribald criticism of their respective duties. John had just said, to confirm his opinion of the muddle shown by his present assignment, 'So here I be, without rhyme or reason, while my exalted masters eddy about in confusion, not knowing whether they be coming or going.'

A voice of authority, a voice of awe, with a cutting edge all the more deadly for its hint of laughter, broke in upon them.

'We are always ready to hear our subjects' views, but would prefer—'

The boys wheeled round with scarlet faces as the voice struck them, snatched off their hats and sank to their knees. Charles stood over them, looking down with black eyes smouldering, while his gentlemen advanced to seize the culprits.

But the King waved them back, ordering the now white-faced boys to rise. He looked from one to the other. It was impossible to know what he thought or what he would do. They quaked inwardly, but met his gaze with respectful courage.

This satisfied him. The new generation, he thought, with his infallible insight, the new intelligent clean-purposed youth. So

necessary for the future, for security, for progress.

Charles said severely, but without anger, ‘Express your critical opinions where you will not meet with embarrassing interruption.’

Reduced to schoolboys under reprimand, they could only hang their heads, speechless. The King’s voice altered. With icy scorn he said, ‘Arrogant puppies! Go now, before I have ye both whipped!’

As they hurried out of the gallery their misery was increased by a peal of laughter, led by Charles himself.

But they were young and soon recovered. In this, as they hastened away across St. James’s Park to the Duke in his apartments at the Palace there, they were helped by the sight of the Queen and her ladies walking together. The Duchess of York was at the Queen’s side.

Queen Catherine of Braganza was no beauty, but had a pleasant modest face and a fully regal carriage. Had she been able to supply an heir to the throne no doubt the King would have shown more restraint in his behaviour, though his nature and established habit would never have allowed him complete monogamy. Though his countrymen chose to find fault, to blame him severely, with religious scruple mixed with considerable hypocrisy, potentates all over the world behaved in like manner. Those in non-Christian countries were uncensured, in fact provided for, by the establishment of well-organised harems, or in China by separately housed concubines under the control of a chief wife.

Queen Catherine endured her difficult position with much patience and courage, for which the King was grateful. In fact he grew to be very fond of her for her forebearance and if at times he neglected her totally, he also at times attempted to show her, by marked admiration and attention, that he knew well the trials he inflicted upon her.

The two boys, meeting the Queen with her maids of honour and ladies in waiting about her, stood respectfully at a distance from the moving group of fair faces, flowing silken robes and ribbons of many colours, flowered or plumed head-dresses. They bowed deeply several times, an action acknowledged by the Queen with a slight inclination of her own head.

But when the little procession had nearly gone by, one figure

detached itself from the Duchess's group and one other waited for her to rejoin them.

Arabella Churchill came quickly up to her brother, exclaiming, 'John, I have tried to see you these many weeks, but there hath been no opportunity. You are well? You are happy, brother?'

He was delighted to see her, for until that morning and his discovery of a kindred spirit in young Godolphin, he had been lonely, uncertain of himself, often confused and usually critical of the wealth of etiquette and protocol in a life that seemed to be a strange mixture of sheer frivolity and great danger, both at home and abroad.

'I am well indeed, sister. But I have no news of my father and mother. At least I know he works at his office, but they—'

'Are still safe from the plague in the country near Hampton, Wootton being altogether too far off. Now that the Court is here again, at least for a time, they may perhaps return.'

'Safer to stay away,' John said. He turned to introduce his new friend to his sister and they spoke a few words between them all until Arabella, seeing the distant lady-in-waiting beckon, took leave and picking up her ample skirts ran quickly and gracefully to rejoin the Queen's group.

The boys walked on. Presently Godolphin said, 'Your sister hath a lively manner of speaking.'

'But a plain face, you would say,' John answered. 'Nay, I agree with you. But I love her, for she was kind to me when we were little and saved me from my nurse's beating on many occasions.'

'Did you note my Lady Castlemaine stayed for her? I marvel they can be friends.'

John laughed. 'No marvel. Simply a matter of family relationship.'

He explained the cousinship between his mother's family and the House of Villiers. In fact, he said, Lady Castlemaine was Arabella's second cousin once removed, as he was himself.

'Older by some years than you and your sister,' remarked Godolphin, sensibly. He was, nevertheless, much impressed by the connection.

'Oh yes. I have been told His Majesty singled her out very soon after his return. Nearly six years ago.'

'And second to none since then save this Mrs. Stewart we see favoured with great ardour from time to time.'

‘As page to His Majesty you must know more of these matters than I,’ John said. Gossip on the subject of the King’s mistresses was universal and unending. At times it entertained him, at others the nonconformist side of his ancestry asserted itself in a certain prudery. So now the subject was dropped and the newly made friends walked on in silence.

At St. James’s Palace they parted, promising to meet again the following day, unless their duties prevented it.

‘I am not certain we stay in Whitehall,’ Godolphin explained. ‘If the lull in the great evil goes on, yes. But we have spent much time at Hampton Court and further afield in Salisbury and great houses north of the river.’

‘The Duke hath braved the worst of it in Westminster, apart from his journeys with the Fleet and even at sea in that early battle with the Dutch.’

They parted then, but with every intention of pursuing a friendship so fortuitously begun, so alarmingly hazarded, so luckily continued.

John Churchill reported the negative result of his mission, returned the papers he had carried and found the matter discharged without further comment. He went away from the Duke’s Chamberlain’s office without further employment for that day and sought out a fellow page to suggest a visit to one of the two playhouses, called the King’s and the Duke’s, now revived as the worst rigours of the plague seemed to have receded at last.

The theatres had been closed almost at once when the present epidemic became rampant. Since the cause of the disease was totally unknown, no really effective measures could be taken to control its spread, except an attempt to limit it by shutting up infected houses, leaving the sick and the healthy to fight it out together. Few survived among those quarantined wretches. Whole families perished.

But it was easy to close the public institutions, to prevent public gatherings. So for a time the theatres and all concerned with them suffered in their livelihoods. Though with the Restoration the people longed for their old entertainments, at the height of the affliction they were again deprived. While terror ruled they endured easily. Many no longer had any wish for gaiety, since their loved ones had died this horrible death. But later, with folk again going about their normal business –

shops opening, trade of all kinds reviving – the people refused any longer to be denied their favourite reliefs.

The Churchills were fortunate. Lady Churchill and her younger children remained out of London for eighteen months longer, while Sir Winston, Arabella, John and George served their respective masters wherever their work for these notables led them. In the end the plague abated as it never failed to do in due course, though it was always considered probable that it might break out afresh.

So by the time it was thought safe for the King to return to Whitehall, even the City of London had grown once more into its former crowded, bustling state.

Until John discovered Sidney Godolphin and knew he had found a real friend, he had often been uncertain how to spend his time when he was on duty as a page. He was not particularly interested in Court life. The arts, suppressed by Cromwell's Puritans, were now in process of exuberant revival. Charles revelled in the theatre, in plays, masques, extravagant spectacle. Actors, supported now in the female parts by women, flourished particularly in the two royal theatres. Balls at which Charles himself excelled in the dance brought the younger aristocracy together, while the public crowded to watch all open entertainment, whether in Vauxhall Gardens, the Royal Parks, or on the river. But John Churchill, watching, learning, taking his modest part in the proceedings, did not find any full pleasure in them to satisfy the serious side of his nature. Art, as such, held no meaning at all for him.

But the martial side of the Duke's life did so in greater measure as time went on. The Duke's position as Lord High Admiral meant concern with fighting ships; and at that time naval crews sailed the ships, but the fighting was done by the soldiers on board. John came into contact with troops while in attendance upon the Duke of York. His interest and enthusiasm were so great they were readily observed. Even the Duke noticed them.

'You understand the object of these drillings?' he asked one day as John, standing behind him, watched the groups moving on parade, practising the manning of guns and so on.

'I try to, your Highness,' John answered.

'What do you make of it?'

The boy hesitated, then said, ‘I am not sure what movement relates to battle on board ship, which to the act of boarding an enemy and which to the practice of landing upon a foreign shore.’

The Duke laughed. ‘That does not surprise us, for we have the same difficulty ourself this morning.’

He was impressed by young Churchill’s answer but said no more on that occasion. He did not forget, however, and saw to it that this particular page should attend him upon other similar occasions.

Each time he found that the young man missed very little of what was going on and always gave an intelligent answer and a shrewd appreciation of the problem involved. The Duke even summoned those officers conducting the drilling and made them explain to him what they intended. All this in John’s hearing, but without of course attaching him to the consultation.

Nevertheless young Churchill heard and absorbed it all. Through his young brother George, who had never in his childhood dared to disobey John, except by hiding from him, he managed to visit the Earl of Sandwich’s library while the latter was away at sea. There he made short inroads upon the nobleman’s book of naval history in the time of the ancients and from then on to present times. George kept watch while John read standing, alert to push the book back into its place on the shelf if any servant came in to disturb them.

They had one or two narrow escapes, but no disclosure. John stored his knowledge in his head until he could make notes of it; he bought news sheets in which he found accounts of petty encounters at sea, principally with the Dutch. He compared the actions of past times with those of the present. To analyse his conclusions gave him enormous pleasure.

‘When war comes to be declared with the Dutch,’ he told Godolphin, ‘I must by some means find my way into it. Will it be long to wait?’

‘No time at all, if you go for the present campaign at sea. For the port of Tangier, rather than the Dutch. We talk of it all the time in Whitehall. Those clerks of the Navy Office and Lord Sandwich and the Duke are continually coming to seek funds to set up ships for the Fleet in the Mediterranean. That’s where they fight now and are like to continue if funds be found for it.’

This news filled John with fresh resolve. But he could do nothing to further his desires except wait carefully upon the Duke and keep his ears and eyes open for any news of a martial kind.

Chapter Five

In the early hours of the morning of September 2nd, 1666 a journeyman working at Farriner's bakehouse in Pudding Lane in the City of London smelled smoke and, tracing it to its origin, discovered fire. He decided that it was quite beyond him to deal with it by himself, for it grew rapidly as he gazed at it, horrified. So he promptly roused the household and while the older male members of it ran to confirm his report, the women threw on their clothes, gathered as many of their movable possessions as they could and ran out of the upper rooms in order to leave the house.

They met the men folk rushing back. The whole of the ground floor was ablaze, there was no escape that way. However they were all able to clamber on to the roof, over the roof next door and so to the ground and away. All, that is to say, but a maid-servant, who was overcome by the smoke, which hid from the others her choking, failing body, and so was left to perish.

The fire spread quickly. A strong easterly wind was blowing and continued to blow for the next five days. If it had come from the west, the prevailing direction then as now, the flames and sparks would have been blown towards the boundaries of the City to the east and so to the wide flats and marshes where it would have died out for want of fuel. As it was sparks leaped from the wooden back to back houses across the narrow streets to catch neighbouring roofs and trade signs hanging from shops and inns. All were totally vulnerable.

The fire moved west and south. It reached the riverside, where it found piles of inflammable goods in warehouses, at wharves, in barges. It swept along the shore, fed by piled-up rubbish, stacked wood, old tarred wooden skeletons of dead boats.

Fires were not unknown in London. In fact they were of fairly frequent occurrence and were usually brought under control by the efforts of the immediate neighbourhood or, as a sterner measure, by pulling down houses in the direct advance of the flames, so that a gap was made where beaters could attack with sticks and water.

But this fire was different. It had started very early in the morning, not much after midnight, well before dawn. Nothing had been done at the beginning to control it. The season had been dry, the wind was from the east. Above all the people had no heart to attack the flames. As a consequence of the long terror-filled months of the most severe epidemic of the plague for several years, there were far fewer inhabitants in any part of the town than there had been even a year before. Every family, every shop, inn, trade, had suffered losses, very often the head man, the owner, the leader. Without normal direction, bereaved and despondent, the survivors simply piled their belongings upon any cart or wagon they could find and fled to relations or friends further off.

In the first days of the continuing blaze the fugitives found they had not gone far enough. For the fire pursued them, so that they and their hosts had to flee again, while those who could do so and dreaded fugitives even more than the fire abandoned their houses while there was still time to find means to move their goods and chattels outside the walls of the city itself.

Reports of the fire came to Westminster and Whitehall quite soon. By the evening of the first day the Lieutenant of the Tower had been informed of the seriousness of the situation. Before that, quite early, still in darkness, the Lord Mayor had been roused and had gone on horseback to the scene. But he decided it was trivial, and expected it to be dealt with in the usual manner. He went home to bed.

The Lieutenant thought otherwise. His investigations horrified him. The fire had spread down to the river by London Bridge and had destroyed the Water House there and the first houses on the bridge itself. There a gap, caused by a former fire some years ago, had halted it. But along the riverside it was spreading rapidly. Several churches had been destroyed, along with many well-known inns, including the Old Swan tavern.

The Lieutenant sent a messenger to the King. So did Mr. Samuel Pepys of the Navy Office, who had gone to investigate by water and had passed the Bridge upstream in his boat, to discover the extent of the fire. He was able to report that nothing was being done to stop it, the people were removing their possessions in boats or simply running away on land.

Orders came back to pull down houses before the fire in the

usual way, but they were not obeyed. The Lord Mayor proved useless in his attempts to organise a defence against the fire. The people had begun to panic. Had the fire been started by the Dutch, the French, the Papists? Instead of responding to the Lord Mayor's orders and pleas, they tried to arm themselves against a supposedly imminent invasion.

In the afternoon, news of the spread of the fire having reached the King from several sources, he and his brother the Duke of York went down the river from Whitehall to see it for themselves. They were duly impressed: Charles was particularly annoyed by the stupidity of the Lord Mayor and the ineptitude of the Lieutenant of the Tower. Firebreaks ought by now to have been set up, particularly to the west of the burning, for the easterly wind was blowing more strongly than ever. But it was not until the following day, Monday, that the fire was officially recognised and announced in the *London Gazette*.

Meanwhile Charles had sent Lord Craven with a party of the Guards to help to subdue it and had placed the Duke at the head of operations. By this time the red glow could be seen even in the sunlight of that fine September morning, while the smoke hung all over the western part of the City and penetrated to Westminster itself.

Important noblemen, always on the lookout for opportunities to earn praise and recompense from the sovereign, joined the Duke's organisation. With the help of the Earl of Manchester, my lords Craven, Ashley and others, fire posts were set up at Temple Bar, Fetter Lane and Cow Lane, manned by soldiers and volunteer civilians with forward posts served by the militia.

In the east the wind held back the flames, which made only slow progress. But to the west they spread with terrifying speed and force. Baynard's Castle on the Thames had gone by Monday night except for its stout walls. The Heralds' Office was burned, but the recrods were saved and taken to Whitehall Palace.

To the north, towards St. Paul's cathedral, churches, inns and houses were reduced to piles of burning ash. The clergy in many cases stored their valuable plate in the church crypts before leaving but such was the heat of the fire that much of the treasure was reduced to unidentifiable masses of molten gold and silver.

At the Court of Prince James young John Churchill was

among the first of the gentlemen of the Household to volunteer for service in fighting the fire. The Duke had already noticed this particular page of honour for his interest in military matters, so he was not surprised to find young Churchill anxious to serve in the present emergency. In spite of his youth and general inexperience he appointed him to the fire post at Cornhill under the command of the young Duke of Monmouth, the eldest and most favoured bastard son of the King.

John had already seen this young man on several occasions among Charles's immediate entourage, either playing cards or dice, amusing his father with lively anecdote, chiefly of a bawdy nature, or showing off his graceful mastery of the dance. John had not admired what he saw, but had confided this view to none but his friend Godolphin. It had not taken him long to learn that discretion was of life-saving importance. Gossip heaved up and down with the unceasing movement of a strong tide, while the heavy waves of scandal were apt to drown its originator just as readily as the victim.

At the Cornhill firepost the young Duke rallied his small group of men with characteristic charm and total lack of system or design.

'The flames are not upon us yet, friends,' he shouted to the group, which was composed of not more than twenty men. 'So there must be no panic over our operations.'

'What be they, your Grace?' one middle-aged citizen demanded. He had abandoned his house in the neighbourhood and settled his wife and children with friends further off before returning to stop the fire, as he imagined.

Monmouth, who did not know the man and resented the question, gave him a haughty stare, but no answer. Let the fellow listen and obey and he would get his answer.

'As the Duke, my uncle, hath ordered,' he shouted to the others, 'we must make a fire break. There, and there, and there,' he pointed. 'Go to it! Break them up! Break them down!'

No one moved. The Duke had pointed at three empty houses, two to the south, one to the west. The roaring, flaming menace, the smoke that enveloped them in great choking waves, lay to the east.

John Churchill groaned aloud. The little Duke was more stupid than he had yet realised. They had still time to make their

break but it grew less with every minute.

'On! On!' shrieked Monmouth, waving his arms now to every point in the compass.

John seized his opportunity. Three other young men had moved near him to get a good look at the King's bastard. They were apprentices whose masters had used them to move his goods and then told them he had no further use for them, his business having been destroyed for the time being. John swept his eyes over them, cried, 'Follow me!' and dashed away through the smoke towards the nearest house that lay in the path of the fire, now only a couple of streets away.

These houses had all been abandoned. If they had been pulled down and their timbers pushed into a heap to prevent them filling the narrow roadways and thus forming a link to guide the fire, it might have been stopped at Cornhill.

But the action was too slow, too inefficient. They lacked tools of a size and weight to lay the houses to the ground, though they were small and made of wood and plaster, not brick. Moreover the Duke of Monmouth proved to be quite useless in controlling the men under his command. He was very young, only nineteen at this time; he was the spoilt darling of his father's heart, no one at Court dared to criticise his conceit, his showing-off, his slow mind, his underlying vulgarity. But Cornhill was not the Court. The middle-aged merchant citizens facing ruin found no pleasure in pulling down a part of their own neighbourhood in order that rival tradesmen further off might escape and flourish.

So they worked reluctantly, often stopping to put out abandoned objects of value and lay them aside to take away later. While John Churchill and his young men made a fine heap in the direct advance, it was not supported by the efforts of those at either hand.

The fire had now approached to within fifty yards, its heat had become unbearable, sparks flying on the wind in advance of it. The roar and crackle numbed the brain, the smoke had now passed over their heads and beyond, the air they breathed burned in their mouths and noses, burned into their lungs. They turned and fled.

John, rushing back to where Monmouth stood, white-faced, gasping, irresolute, grasped his arm and croaked out, 'For God's

sake, sir, order our retreat or we shall fall before the flames! There be some already scarce able to walk, let alone run!'

Monmouth stared at him. His slow wits told him he had seen this young man before, with his uncle Prince James, at Court, and now, yes, today, beside him today.

'You sir,' he gasped, his lips trembling, 'you belong to the Duke?'

'Aye, your Grace.'

'Then go tell him we – we must leave this post. At once. Yes, at once.'

John nearly laughed. Of those who had worked beside him during their feeble efforts to make a break in the path of the fire, he saw only three beside himself. The others had disappeared into the smoke pall to the west.

He tightened his grip on the Duke of Monmouth's arm, turning him round and beginning to force him to walk away, assuring him as they moved that he would go back at once to the Duke of York to report their failure and to ask for fresh orders.

'Failure! What failure?' demanded Monmouth, stopping in his tracks. 'You will report no such thing, sir! This Fire is a malignant force of nature. It is a—'

He stopped speaking, overcome equally by the malignant force of nature that had dried up his mouth and the force of his own nature engulfing him in speechless fury.

When they were sufficiently far away from the advancing fire to be safe, at least for the time being, John turned his unhappy commander over to those two of his gentlemen who had followed without interfering. He bowed respectfully, hatless, because he had lost that important part of his dress in pulling down houses; gloveless, for those articles of apparel had been torn to shreds in the same exercise. With his clothes, stockings and shoes covered with fine ash, dust, and the dirt of ages, he made his way back to where the Duke of York, still at work directing his own plans for the Fleet Ditch, was directing his men in person.

All the way there John had to struggle through the crowds that still fled westwards, pursued by the monster that hourly took on more and more of a human malignancy in their terrified minds. They still made no effort to fight it. Their one idea was to

escape with as many movable goods as possible. Not now to friends a few streets away, but further off, even beyond the city walls – to the outlying villages, to Kensington in the west, in the north to the hills at Highgate and Hampstead, to Islington and the fields beyond that. Every cart that could be hired or taken, every horse, had already gone. In the more fashionable parts about the theatres in Covent Garden and along the Strand, all areas where the plague had taken a heavy toll and where the great lords and their families had not yet returned from their refuges in the country, their dependants and housekeeping staff had already made good their escape, using any coach that stood in the yard, any newly fashionable sedan chair, waiting their master's return. From those houses at the waterside they took to the boats. Craft of all kinds and sizes covered the river, making always upstream when the tide allowed, even rowing desperately against it to gain distance to the west before the monster reached them.

John Churchill, trudging back through the throng, ignored all demands for help with a cry of 'On the Duke's business!' He managed to avoid being forced from his errand. He was nearly exhausted when he came upon the first of the militia. Here he needed to argue his identity to avoid a more serious conscription, but he managed it with his inborn forcefulness in the face of opposition. Again upon two occasions he escaped by taking to his heels and outdistancing the pursuers. When finally he reached the Duke's immediate entourage he was breathless, shaking and so weak that as he made his low bow he very nearly fell on his face. In a faint trembling voice he gave his message from Monmouth.

The Duke showed his anger in his stiffened body and the pallor of his smoke-grimed face. But all he said was, 'You have done well to reach me! Why did his Grace not bring back his men instead of making it *your* business to inform me?'

'They had mostly dispersed already, when his Grace ordered the retreat, your Highness,' John answered. It was a very poor excuse and he was not surprised to see the Duke frown. So he added, 'His Grace had need of rest and—food. We had not eaten —'

'You too,' James said, turning to his gentlemen. 'Take my page and feed him,' he ordered. Then turned away to consider again

how he might use the Fleet Ditch to halt the fire.

By the next day half the City had gone, but still the fire, helped by the continuing east wind, spread further and further west and north. During Monday night the wealthy merchants had fought to save their valuable goods and records in the great halls of their guilds; to move them to places of safety. The iron-bound boxes of the Goldsmiths and Silversmiths and their irreplaceable accounts went to the Tower. At the Drapers' Hall the plate was put down a well. But most of the halls of the many trades were totally destroyed, except where by good fortune a piece of open ground or a large garden left a space the fire could not cross.

Guildhall was burned out but the stone walls stood and the crypt survived, though Gog and Magog burned with the rest of the furniture. The records were removed and saved.

Behind Guildhall the Coopers' Hall was destroyed after the collected members met and each took away to safety a part of the company's property.

At Moorgate and Cripplegate the fire posts at last had a measure of success, both in holding back the fire or by blowing up houses in the path of its advance.

This method of making fire breaks had followed upon action by the Navy in the east of the City. Mr. Pepys's Navy Office was threatened by a spread of the fire when the east wind slackened on the third day of the conflagration. He moved his papers further east to Woolwich and managed to enlist the serving Navy from the Fleet to hold back the fire.

This they did with considerable success. Accustomed to battling with repairs and taking in sails from slender spars at great heights above rolling and pitching decks, the men found it easy to destroy flimsy houses no more than twenty feet high for the most part. Nor, used to gunpowder and its use, in blowing apart rows of such houses to make gaps too wide and too well controlled to allow the flames to spread across them.

Other fire posts began to succeed in their efforts. But at Blackfriars and Ludgate and the Duke's efforts at the Fleet they did not manage to stem the advance. The great cathedral of St. Paul's was engulfed that evening. St. Paul's School, where John Churchill and earlier Mr. Pepys himself had been scholars, was lost. Also the Old Bailey and much of Holborn. The actual stone

walls of the City remained standing, for the most part in a ruined state, but the fire spread along Fleet Street to the Temple and the Strand, where only by blowing up houses could Somerset House be saved. Houses were destroyed up to Charing Cross in order to save Whitehall.

On Wednesday morning the Queen and the Duchess of York took a coach to Hampton Court, from whence they had not long returned after the plague subsided. Their immediate household went with them, including all the maids of honour and the ladies in waiting. But many of the gentlemen remained to attend Charles and his brother, who were still closely and actively concerned with the fire.

The voice of the people grew louder and firmer as the peril spread. This was not in anger against the fate of those victims who had perished. In fact there were astonishingly few fatal casulaties. Of all the thousands who had lost their homes and their property, their livelihoods and their recreations, only six deaths, six corpses recorded, were ever found. Others may have been reduced to ashes or were lost and drowned fleeing by water. But only the Farriners' maidservant, an old woman trying to shelter near St. Paul's and four other bodies were found when it was all over and the desert of ash cooled enough to allow a search to be made. The general anger was directed overwhelmingly against foreigners and this greatly alarmed the King. He informed the Lords Lieutenant of surrounding counties to be prepared for insurrection. General Monk, now Lord Albemarle, was also warned.

All through the day on Wednesday the fight went on, but now the fire posts, with more aid from the Navy, began to gain control. The top end of Chancery Lane was saved. Lord Craven held back the fire at Holborn Bridge and at Smithfield. At Cripplegate the Lord Mayor was in belated action, watched by both the King and the Duke.

But the danger was not yet over. The Inner Temple was again threatened and again saved. It was not until Friday that no fresh outbursts were reported, the smoke, the falling mass of paper, clothing, blown charcoal, scraps of smouldering wood, began to subside. Those curious enough to visit the deserted acres of ruin found progress impossible in the lost streets because the heaped ash there burned the soles of their shoes. And because the air

was heavy with the stench of burning. But not with decay. Human ordure, rotting food, infecting parasites had been removed, purified by burning. The bugs and the lice, the germ-filled water conduits, all had gone. The plague-ridden rats with their infected fleas had burned.

Then began the huge task of recovery. At first it appeared insuperable. The terrified citizens, many encamped in the surrounding countryside, still threatened violence against foreigners, Papists, Quakers; anyone or anything in fact but their own incompetence and greed in saving their movable property rather than making any real effort to control the fire. Also they now had to be fed; thousands were without real shelter, and the winter was before them with its very real threats of cold, famine and all the usual diseases that stem from the hardships of poverty.

At this stage Charles proved his real ability. He sent out a proclomation setting up markets for food, clothing and other necessary domestic goods. He took measures to control the false rumours among the refugees outside the City walls, using his army and the guards where necessary. He named Gresham House as a meeting place instead of the ruined Exchange and there addressed the people in person, promising aid and denying the existence of any human plot to start the fire. In the ruined churches the clergymen preached that it was the will of God, to punish the people for their sins.

Nevertheless Parliament took a hand in the matter, forming its own committee of inquiry into how the disaster had begun. They took the opportunity to demand fresh measures against all Roman Catholics as well as making a close search for arms in the burned-out houses of known Papists. But they made little real progress and the whole question of cause was in the end left undecided.

It was amazing, however, with what speed the City magnates sorted out their affairs and began to restore their vital trading and manufacture, finding premises for their various offices all over the still standing parts of the town, and even for the Law Offices in the shell of Guildhall. Throughout this period the people of London showed their true spirit. Panic had made them cowards, fire being almost irresistible in producing it. Adversity brought out their innate courage. Recovery and rebuilding, as

soon as the rubbish was cleared and materials and plans produced, was quite unexpectedly rapid.

Through it all the King worked untiringly to encourage, to provide, to induce Parliament to vote funds. Though by now he had war on his hands with both the Dutch and the French, he never forgot the needs of his ruined capital, nor failed to give wise advice on the rebuilding. He ordered that all new buildings must be made of brick or stone or a combination of the two. He insisted that workmen be allowed to come in from outside to increase the labour force, with the inducement that they might stay as freemen of the City if they worked there for seven years.

Complete plans for the whole area, by Wren and again by Evelyn, were not accepted, but in the course of the following years Sir Christopher's designs for churches were embodied in over fifty new places of worship, including the great new cathedral of St. Paul's.

Later on, at the site of Farrinder's bakery, where the fire began, a monument was built to commemorate the disaster. Wren wanted to put a statue of Charles on the top in recognition of his great services during and after the fire. But the monarch decided in favour of a stone urn with stone flames, made by Robert Hooke of the Royal Society, whose plan for London had been preferred.

On a plinth below, however, a statue of the King did appear, dressed as a Roman General and described as '—affording protection to the desolate City,' which appeared as a distracted young woman, lying down, scantily dressed, with the 'General' leaning tenderly over her ample naked bosom.

When Charles inspected this tribute, his gentlemen found it difficult to contain their mirth. They noticed that the lines about the King's mouth grew deeper and his black eyes began to sparkle as he stared at the work of art. But when he turned away he only said, very gravely, to the respectful dignitaries near him, 'We thank you, my Lord Mayor and the people of London, for this kindness.' And with equal gravity to Rochester, the celebrated, but often bawdy poet, 'A most telling pose, my lord, do you not agree? But *not*, we insist, a fit subject for your verse.'

Chapter Six

Lady Churchill had been greatly pleased and flattered by the Duchess of York's favour in taking Arabella into her household as one of her maids of honour. The other three maids at that time were Dorothy Howard, Anne Ogle and Mary Blagge. They were looked after by a Mrs. Lucy Wise, performing the duty known as 'mother' or 'governess' of the maids.

Arabella went to live at the palace of St. James's, where the Duke and Duchess lived and held their Court. The girls had suitable apartments near to one another, with Mrs. Wise not far off.

The young Arabella was delighted with her appointment. It was the culmination of a long-continuing effort to escape from the rural desert of Wootton Glanville. Ireland had been interesting, but the company there round Sir Winston had not provided anyone to attract her growing adolescense or satisfy her longing for amusements, pleasures and activities of a more sophisticated kind. In England at the Duke's Court, and on the many occasions when the Duchess attended the Court of Charles himself, she had found almost a surfeit of all she had dreamed of. Her only fear had been that it might not last.

From Arabella's still innocent account of both courts and her husband's more informed but somewhat astonished ones, Lady Churchill began to understand something of the moral jungle below the magnificence, the richness, the display.

The magnificence was certainly there. It was spread before the general public in countless set pieces such as balls, theatre plays and masques. Also in river excursions, both by day and by night, when fireworks lit up the brilliant throng in the decorated barges, to the delight of all who watched from the banks. There were musical concerts, both indoors and at times outdoors, too. There were masquerades, particularly favoured by the Queen, when all the guests whom her Majesty commanded to appear must go dressed in some character not their own but taken from myth or history, from well-known poetry or prose.

And with it all the men spent much of their time in gaming

and betting, horse racing and hunting in the open spaces and woods still quite near in the country about London. Both sexes filled any empty hours they had left in the day, between eating and drinking and the unending pursuit of love.

It was from all the tales brought to her as well as from her own observation and experience that Lady Churchill began to develop a certain uneasiness. As she had struck up a measure of acquaintance with the maids' governess, Mrs. Wise, she sought an occasion to hear more of the truth of it.

'I feel anxious for Arabella, madam,' she said, after polite exchanges between them became exhausted.

'In what way, my lady?' Mrs. Wise asked cautiously.

'I think I have let her walk into a lion's den all innocent and unprepared,' Lady Churchill explained.

Mrs. Wise pursed her lips, considering.

'At least, I know she was innocent and unknowing until her service with the Duchess began,' Lady Churchill insisted, still more alarmed.

'What have you heard, my lady?' Mrs. Wise asked.

'Tales. Shocking tales, madam. Of pursuit, seduction, scandal. Young gallants everywhere, stalking their prey more particularly among the maids of honour, whom they consider fair game, without a thought of marriage.'

'That shocks you, my lady?'

'It doth indeed, madam.'

They stared at one another. Mrs. Wise guessed that Lady Churchill had hoped for some advantage from her plain girl's position. Lady Churchill saw that Mrs. Wise had understood her without being told. She also saw that the governess had as little fear of Arabella's seduction as she had of the girl being pursued by a would-be husband.

'At least,' Lady Churchill said, 'I take it there is no fear of my poor girl being approached by that unnatural harpy, Miss Hobart?'

'None,' answered the governess, 'and I thank God for it.'

Miss Hobart had been one of the original maids of honour to the Duchess of York, together with Miss Bagot, Miss Blagge, who was still in that office with Arabella, a Miss Price and a Miss Firth. Miss Hobart had become notorious through her friendship with that Miss Stewart who had recently won the King's favour.

She had supported the empty-headed beauty in her reputed rivalry with the Countess of Castlemaine, less from a friendly feeling of support than for the gratification of her own desires. When the connection came to an end with her undoubted repudiation by Miss Stewart, Hobart transferred her affection to Miss Bagot, her fellow maid of honour at the time. This girl returned the affection at first, but when she found much more was expected of her, she too extricated herself from such a dangerous situation, in a way that could not fail to be noticed by the maids' governess, who took the tale to Lord Rochester.

This unprincipled but brilliant satirist received the gossip with joy. It fitted several other tales he had had of Miss Hobart's unusual behaviour. Besides, he had enjoyed a wider education than the anxious governess of the maids. His knowledge of the ways of high society in ancient Greece gave him a better insight into this new appearance of an age-old vice. So his verses on the subject held a fiercer cutting edge which he used to the best advantage.

In consequence Miss Hobart lost her position as a maid of honour, but since the Duchess of York was sorry for her and perhaps did not understand, certainly did not seem to be revolted by, Miss Hobart's pursuit of her own sex, the culprit was made a woman of the bedchamber in the Duchess's entourage.

In contrast with Miss Hobart, one of the other maids gave clear evidence of a notably pure life and spirit. Miss Blagge was a friend of John Evelyn, the scholar and patron of the arts, a man of exemplary character whom the girl regarded almost as a father and who encouraged her in piety and religious observance.

So on the whole the Churchill parents were reassured about their daughter. Moreover the longer they lived on the fringe of the two Courts, that of the King, slowly becoming the more brilliant, not only for pleasure, display, gallantry and gaming, but also for wit and the pursuit of both science and the arts, so by degrees these two country folk came to lower their own moral standards. They accepted situations and behaviour that would have filled their provincial souls with horror in the old days of repression and honest poverty. In the end they made no great ado over Arabella's fate: in fact they almost brought

themselves to consider it an honour.

Whatever motive the Duchess of York had in taking this plain young woman into her service, a part of it at least was no doubt to be found in the girl's appearance. She was tall and very thin, with a long pale face and lank brown hair, very difficult to bring into any state of elegance, however much it was twisted and tied to form fashionable ringlets. Her mouth was too large, her eyes too small; her complexion could not be improved by cosmetics. Indeed she looked better without them.

She had few accomplishments. She walked with a graceful freedom of movement, but without elegance or distinction. She danced passably well, a little too vigorously. She had a very poor seat on a horse. Indeed she was afraid of the animals and never rode if she could help it, preferring to walk short distances or ride in a coach if the destination was far off.

This lack of ability on horseback did not escape the notice of the Duke himself. He had always liked to supervise the outdoor activities of his household, including those of his Duchess. When she elected to go riding with her maids of honour and her ladies in waiting, he would appear, also on horseback, to watch the turn-out and criticise it. After all, he had spent most of his life in military service, either in the armies of France or of England. Though he had been for a time High Admiral of England's Navy and had been to sea in service against the Dutch, now that this war was clearly in being, with Lord Albermarle promoted to command of the Fleet, his real interest lay with the Army and particularly with the cavalry regiments. The control and management of horses was, with him, a particular and paramount interest.

Arabella Churchill's lack of horsemanship was something of a joke among her fellow maids. Their raillery at her expense certainly did nothing to allay her nervousness. It also brought her to the notice of the Duke, who resented it, not for pity that she should be tormented by her companions; it was not an age of sentimentality; practical jokes were popular and often cruel. But rather, in the Duke's view, because her mortification added to her fear, it was communicated to her horse and he felt sorry for the beast and indignant on its behalf.

He took it upon himself to speak to her after one of these excursions, mainly to advise her to take further lessons in riding.

‘Your horsemanship is most deficient,’ he told her. ‘You bounce hither and thither like a sack of turnips. Your reins fall slack at one moment and so tight at another your poor animal cannot know if it be meant to crop the grass or leap into a charge.’

Poor Miss Churchill hung her head, then curtseyed deeply and looking up said clearly, ‘Your Highness speaks only as I deserve. I have little to say that may excuse me, except that I never learned to ride a horse in childhood, for my parents were too poor at that time of oppression to keep a stable. My father did for many years have one poor old hack only for his own use, though he seldom went abroad for fear of his life.’

The Duke found this explanation from a girl in Arabella’s position far longer than correct etiquette allowed her. On this occasion he waved her away without speaking to her again. But he found himself remembering her words and more particularly the voice she had used. A charming, even a beautiful voice. Rich, low, gentle; very well-spoken. There were too many shrill young women about St. James’s and Whitehall, each trying to impress their gallants with their wit and gaiety and above all their beauty. Well, Miss Churchill had no beauty in her face but there was beauty in the voice that came out from her wide mouth. He decided to hear it again.

It was quite easy for him to make occasion to do so. Just now, having given up his former position with the Navy he was not taking any active part in military matters. He had time on his hands to devote to personal affairs. Perhaps Arabella Churchill—

Churchill. The young man who had tried to prop up the young Duke of Monmouth in the Great Fire. The young man who sought every opportunity to attend him in his efforts to support the fighting forces, watch the raw soldiers drilling, hear, if he could, the officers’ reports and discussions. The Churchills. Was there not another brother, younger than his own page, John, also placed as page with my Lord Sandwich. Well, Sandwich had fallen of late and justly so for his failure in dealing with the Dutch and the waste of funds for the Fleet. Never mind, his own young Churchill was the one that interested him.

A message came to John as he sat at cards with Sidney Godolphin and two other pages. The Duke wished to speak with him. His Highness was out walking in the Park. Mr. Churchill

would do him the favour of joining him there.

'Now what does he want of you?' Sidney grumbled. 'Your master is more importunate than mine. The King rarely demands of me more than the usual duties of the bedchamber.'

'More elaborate, far, than mine,' John answered. 'As befits the monarch. But I must not delay. You will excuse me?'

He was already on his feet. There was no direct response from the others. Clearly he did not exepct any, for he moved away and was gone, while they still sat watching him.

Godolphin gathered the cards together with a sweep of the hand.

'No argument,' he said. 'John assumes too much and yet we feel no enmity. Or do we?'

'None,' the other two told him with a laugh. One of them added, pulling a pair of dice from his pocket, 'Now he is gone we may give up a pretence of play, may we not? This promises more amusement for less effort, I swear.'

'Churchill would never risk losing his cash for the luck of the throw. He reckons to take ours from us by his own sheer skill.'

'And often succeeds, God rot him!'

So they fell to pure gaming of the most primitive kind, where the fall of the dice sent their money travelling back and forth among them until the overall loser pleaded he could go on no longer. John did not return, so after a while they agreed to end their play for that day.

Young Churchill found the Duke with his gentlemen watching the water fowl on one of the ornamental ponds in the Park. Fat, brightly-coloured ducks of several different breeds swam about picking up the crumbs some visitors had thrown into the water. Occasionally a sleek white swan drove among them to rob them of their feast and send them scuttering away in alarm. But for most of the time they moved with self-confident complacence, like prosperous City worthies had used to do before the fire, John thought, and remembered that week of fear. He had shunned the ruined City since those days, unwilling to be reminded further.

As he approached the group about the Duke he was overtaken by a party on horseback. It was the Queen, with all her ladies about her. She had dressed them alike in scarlet riding coats and doublets buttoned up to the neck, periwigs, the curls of which

fell each side of their necks, and flat black beaver hats above. Only their black or deep brown skirts proved they were not men riding side-saddle; also the absence of beards or the shaved marks of them.

The courtiers stood back to let them pass, not concealing their admiration nor their outspoken expression of it. The Duchess of York was there too, with her maids of honour, dressed in similar fashion. Altogether it was a very charming sight.

The Queen herself with the Duchess of York behind her, drew in beside the Duke just as John reached him. He heard the compliments flow, he saw James, hatless, bow deeply to the Queen and acknowledge his wife in less formal manner.

The cavalcade moved on until they were well out of hearing, when the Duke turned to his page and said unexpectedly, 'Your sister, sir, hath a devil of a bad seat on a horse. How comes it? Ye were country folk, were ye not?'

'Aye, your Highness. Dorset folk.'

'Brought up, I do not doubt, on horseback? Though your sister tells me you had no stable.'

'We had one horse for my father until the usurper's death, your Highness. Still but two at the Restoration. Arabella could never bring herself to care for a horse.'

'Unlike you, I hear.'

John reddened. His father had bought him a mount when he took service with the Duke. Since Sir Winston was now established in his office at Whitehall and lived in a house on the outskirts of Westminster, John had placed his beast in his father's stable, thus saving himself considerable expense. His duty, however, directed him to live in the pages' apartments at the Palace.

The Duke saw his embarrassment, but put it down to his youth and did not remark upon it.

'We sent for you,' he said, in a colder, more official voice, 'because we have watched you for some months since you came into our service and particularly your behaviour during the recent disaster to the City. It hath struck us that your talents, such as they be, declare themselves far more in violent action than in the life about the Court. We have recently spoken to your father to discover if your family history can account for this.'

He paused, inviting comment.

John said, ‘My father himself, your Highness, fought all through the civil wars. His late Majesty commended him for it, as his present Majesty most graciously hath done also.’

‘I am well aware of my brother’s bounty,’ the Duke said drily, but in more familiar fashion. ‘Well, sir, whether it be an inheritance or an original gift of God, you have some of the makings of a soldier and none whatever of a courtier. Would you be willing to drop your present employment in favour of a post in the King’s army?’

‘Oh, your Highness!’ John cried, quite overcome. He dropped on one knee and seizing the Duke’s hand, kissed it fervently. ‘Willing! It is my dearest hope, my sole ambition—’

‘Enough, enough!’ James told him, stepping away. His cold nature disliked any strong expression of feeling other than the normal passion he chose to call love. ‘I will see you made ensign. You will be told when and where to start your service. Work hard and you will do well.’

Dismissed thus abruptly John bowed and turned away. He did not feel like rejoining his gambling friends. Play, supremely fashionable at both Courts, rather disgusted him than gave him pleasure. The chances of winning were in the long run negligible. And he was fully determined never to get into debt. He understood poverty too well. On thinking over the whole of his conversation with the Duke it occurred to him that his Master knew much about his family he did not expect. He wondered at it and its possible source. Arabella? He put the thought from him as incredible.

Soon after this the Duchess of York set out on another riding expedition with her ladies, all in their pretty new riding suits. The Duke, also on horseback with a few of his gentlemen, proposed to watch them muster and then perhaps go hunting in a different direction.

His acquaintanceship with Arabella Churchill had continued to grow gently since his first encounter with her. Her face called for little or no praise, but her manner as she became used to speaking to him was grown much less awkward and her voice never failed to please him.

On this occasion, however, her appearance roused him to anger rather than admiration. There she was, slouched upon her

mount, her seat patently insecure, her reins quite dangerously slack, her face turning this way and that, while her fellow maids of honour moved among their mounted and unmounted friends and admirers, laughing, smiling, exchanging wit and charm, all fully in control of their beasts.

James urged his horse forward until he drew rein at her side.

'Madam,' he said in his most harsh, dry voice. 'I do implore you to take lessons in the art of horsemanship. I have said this to you before, but seemingly to no purpose whatever.'

Poor Arabella, startled by his sudden attack, by finding him so close to her and so angry, gave a frightened cry and snatched at her reins. It was a fatal move.

The horse was even more startled than the maid. The sudden drag on its mouth, the rough signal to move, brought an equally abrupt and violent response. In the next moment it was off, bounding away with Arabella still snatching at reins and saddle, tossed to and fro, screaming at the top of her voice. She lost her stirrup before she was gone twenty yards. Struck by the swaying iron the horse broke into a full gallop. In another fifty yards she fell from its back, struck her head on the ground and lay there unconscious, quite oblivious to the fact that her skirts, her petticoats, her shift, had all been tossed over her shoulders as she landed on the ground.

When the horse bolted the Duke followed at once, his irritation turned to alarm by the girl's quite astounding helplessness. The Duchess had not noticed the event until made aware of it by the sudden cries of alarm. But she took no action, so her ladies did not move either. Over the last few weeks her Highness's opinion of Arabella Churchill had suffered a decline.

So the Duke was alone when he reached the scene of the accident. Arabella's horse, puzzled when its rider fell, had moved a little distance away and stood quietly. By good fortune it had not stepped on the drooping rein, though this hung nearly to the ground.

The girl herself lay motionless while the Duke, who had leaped down at once when he reached her, stood staring in amazement at a vision of beauty he had seldom before encountered, so silently and fully displayed as it were by a carved statue. Her features, hidden now as she lay face down, might be plain, but her form was entrancing. A perfect figure,

limbs tapering in gentle, lovely curves, all the proportions of a goddess, he thought, as he stood there.

'Is she dead?' a voice asked behind him.

He was wrenched from his dream, his contemplation of beauty. His groom of the bedchamber, dismounting hurriedly, stepped forward, pulled down Arabella's clothes to cover her, at the same time feeling her legs and spine for any sign of a break. Finding none he very gently turned her over on to her back, propping her head to one side to allow her to breathe more freely.

Her face was as pale as ever, her lips white, the eyes closed. But she took one or two deep breaths and moaned feebly.

'Send for a stretcher and helpers,' said the Duke, preparing to re-mount. 'I will go tell her Highness of this mishap.'

He rode away to report the accident to his wife and to berate her for not going to help the injured girl.

The Duchess accepted his chiding. She had not realised, she said, how very awkward this maid of honour showed herself on horseback. She had assumed a country-bred girl would be familiar with horses. She had shown her favour on account of her loyal parents and in spite of her ugly countenance.

The Duke smiled. On account of it, he decided, as the Duchess had done before in her attempts to prevent his raids upon her household. She did not know of his discovery, nor would he ever tell her of it.

Arabella regained consciousness very rapidly after she had been carried back to the maids' apartments at St. James's. She found herself alone, however, no longer sharing a room with one of her fellows. Mrs. Wise explained that she had been moved to give her quiet and peace for her recovery. She was grateful for this consideration, and said so. It was not until a few days later that she realised her new room was very near the Duke's own apartments.

At the next ball given by the Duchess she was directed to attend, by the governess, but not by the Duchess. In the meantime the Duke had made several occasions to speak to her and she knew, she could not help knowing, his unconcealed intentions.

She was profoundly flattered by the royal pursuit. She was congratulated by her well-wishers and triumphed over her

rivals. She was only nineteen, romantic, still ignorant of the gross ways of the Court. Lady Churchill had always understood her daughter's reckless eagerness with regard to men, but she had not anticipated the present situation and was helpless to prevent its development.

The Duke of York danced three times with Arabella at the Duchess's ball, in a minuet where her graceful movements quite wiped out his recollection of her clumsy fall from her horse; in a sarabande and in two country dances where her lively steps and close proximity inflamed him to the point of action.

In her excitement, her overwhelming curiosity, her gratitude, Arabella made only the feeblest resistance when James arrived in her room in the middle of that night. The Duchess had made some attempt to stop the intrigue by dismissing all the maids of honour from the ball at midnight. But this move had only helped the Duke to achieve his purpose in a reasonably dignified manner.

Shortly after his success with Arabella the Duke relieved John Churchill of his position as page in his service. John was presented with a commission as ensign in a regiment of foot guards.

Chapter Seven

The news was brought to him at Whitehall, so he took it at once to Sidney Godolphin.

'His Highness hath kept his word!' he cried joyfully.

'Did you ever doubt it?'

'Well, no,' John said, answering the deeper look in Godolphin's eyes. 'He must have planned it already, that first time he sent for me to talk of the Army.'

'He must have wished you away to spare an embarrassment.'

John nodded, grinning. 'The baggage gives herself airs, already.'

'So she may. So they all do, except the prudes like my Lady Falmouth and the seekers after fortunes, who also hold out for marriage.'

John laughed. 'And one whom I think you would not call prude so disparagingly.'

'And who be that, pray?'

'Pray is the word! Why, Mary Blagge, of course, whom you always make sure to mention when we speak of the Duchess.'

Godolphin blushed, but said nothing.

John nodded again, becoming serious. 'I must go to my mother and father. They have shock enough already, with Arabella turned royal whore and young George, I hear, gone to sea against the Dutch. And now myself to fight, please God, as soon as I see an opening for action.'

The opening came for him a few weeks later when he had joined his regiment, ordered his uniform as an ensign and met some of his superior officers. There was to be a muster of volunteers from among them to go to Tangier to relieve, support and restore the garrison, much in need of assistance, both physical and moral.

It was an old tale that John had heard often enough without really trying to understand or remember it. Part of the Queen's dowry from Portugal, but more of a liability than a profitable acquisition. Now it had become a real danger, very urgent. Also at the same time a wonderful opportunity for him to begin at

last to see the world beyond England. He had not yet even travelled across the Channel to France.

'That is where you will serve later, I am sure,' Sir Winston told him. 'For France was our friend in the exile, far more so than the House of Orange. The Dutch fight us now for our trade because we rival theirs and because our Princess Royal is Regent for the young Prince and the sour merchants of the republic do not like her.'

'The French are ready to fight us too.'

'The French pirates as well, I am told. A sad mixed state of things,' said Sir Winston, heavily. 'For the people in general hate and fear both the Dutch and the French. Nevertheless our own Princess Royal and her son, Orange William, belong here in their religion and their close ties, whereas Louis of France, though a first cousin of the King, is a Papist and does not. And yet on account of his mother and his best-beloved sister Charles himself clings to Louis more, much more.'

'I think it is not only for love,' John said. 'I think it is necessity.'

Without daring to be more explicit John meant to convey, what he had heard as rumour, that the King received money from his wealthy cousin of France. Upon this dire conclusion John and his father could agree without danger, without the least treasonable thought, because they both loved the King and both reverenced money as the necessary means to power. The King must be preserved in power. Neither saw moral turpitude in this, though the gold must be coming secretly from France.

But the House of Commons would see treason in it: precisely that. In his attendances at Westminster, as member for Weymouth, Sir Winston was made aware of the strength of that middle-of-the-road, Protestant feeling, expressed best in the Anglican church. Not every man in the chamber of the House approved of episcopacy, for the bishops had rushed in again all too readily after the Restoration to secure the plums of the profession without much thought for the cure of souls and the provision of humble parish shepherds for the large neglected flocks. But it was generally agreed by now that the Anglican church was the true Church of England. Presbyterians and all the odd sects were to be discouraged in spite of freedom of conscience, all but Papists, who must be put down.

In spite of his apparent laziness over the forms of State business, Charles knew these facts and accepted them as the very foundation of his throne. His Court must rival that of his French cousin in brilliance and luxury, nor did it fall behind over the arts and sciences. In fact the names of the early Fellows of the Royal Society, set up by Charles himself, became as widely, if not more successfully, known than those in the forefront of French thought and discovery. Experiments continued to be made at Oxford and elsewhere, sometimes upon living animals. For instance the blood of a dog had been transferred to another dog, which had survived and thrived upon it. This opened hopeful speculation upon the success of a like operation between men.

Encouraged by his father's understanding and confidence young Churchill met Godolphin again the following day. There was to be an outing in barges upon the river in order to go down below the Bridge to Greenwich. Those nervous of the water held back. Since these journeys were made on the ebb, any venture below the Bridge meant that hair-raising drive through the arches, where an unskilful boatman had upon occasion been known to wreck his barge on one of the sixteen stone piers with little hope of rescue for the passengers.

On this afternoon John went with Sidney Godolphin as his companion. The former now being discharged from the Duke's service necessarily avoided his former colleagues. He had made no particular intimate among them and had no wish to hear their gossip about his sister.

The King came down to the river as the two friends stood together. They saw him in good time to dispose themselves correctly as he arrived and passed. Perhaps he remembered seeing these two young fresh faces together upon a former occasion. At any rate he paused for a second, decided to make no more of it and moved on. Lady Castlemaine, for once superceding Miss Stewart, who had gone into the country, said, 'You noticed those two boys, sire? You know them?'

'Should I?' Charles asked, scarcely interested.

'Only that the handsome one is a cousin of mine own upon his mother's side.'

The King shook his head and laughed.

'Your relations! These Villiers pop up like coneys from a

warren! Like mushrooms overnight! Doth he know you? Or is it an independent strain of the breed?'

Being used to the King's humour she knew how to turn it to advantage.

'His father, Sir Winston Churchill, was honoured by your Majesty. The boy was taken for a page by His Highness.'

'I do recollect them now. Also a most persistent old woman. Goose—Gander—*Drake*! Am I right?'

'As ever, sire.'

'With James, did you say? Churchill?—Why, that M—'

'Removed into the Army, this young John, your Majesty.'

Charles stared at her. They had walked slowly on and then stopped; the other courtiers, just out of earshot, waited, wondering if another quarrel was to break out or what else could be the matter.

'Go,' Charles said suddenly. 'Go greet your young cousin from me and tell him to find more occasion for action at Tangier than in my brother's bedchamber.'

As she dropped her acquiescing curtsey, Barbara Villiers nearly gasped aloud. So Charles knew all about John, though he had not condescended to greet him. He knew he had gained a commission and that he had volunteered for Tangier. He knew his former post had been as a page and he had mentioned the bedchamber to hint that he was perfectly aware who had become his brother's new mistress.

Lady Castlemaine turned back as directed. She gave John the King's message for which he sent suitable humble thanks to his Majesty. She spoke a few friendly family words. But John, being still not quite eighteen, found himself tongue-tied before such high court manners, such overwhelming, such professional beauty. He tried hard to speak naturally and Godolphin, who was more fluent than he, came to his aid when he could not find any answer to one of the lady's questions. But it was not a success, though she persevered for a few minutes before taking formal leave of him.

'I wonder why she took this trouble?' he said to Godolphin, when she had moved away.

'I think she was commanded,' answered his friend. 'But with what purpose I do not pretend to guess.'

Lady Castlemaine discovered this when she reached the hard.

For the King had by now embarked and was gone without her. There was no message.

All due deference was shown her, another barge indicated. But my lady knew better. She had received a deliberate rebuff. Charles was not interested in her family; she had tried to direct his interest to John Churchill; he had not accepted it.

So Lady Castlemaine detached herself from the river party. She did not appear at Greenwich but went back to her own house in Westminster, where she sat and thought for a while about her young cousin. Such a handsome lad, tall and strong and with that charming smile he could produce when he could not find courtly words to use. A face in a thousand among all those simpering and scowling fools her Master favoured, or perhaps only endured.

Charles looked for her at Greenwich and when she did not appear and he was told she had gone home instead, he laughed delightedly and swore she was the only woman who ever understood him.

That night he arrived on her doorstep in a long black cloak with only two attendants. He stayed till dawn.

It was nearly a month before John left London for Portsmouth to join the convoy of ships that was preparing to sail out to Tangier. During that time he had undergone training of a sort. Not the drill applied to the men, but some intensive theoretical work on strategy as used in naval warfare, the part played by the soldiers in fights between vessels, in boardings, in landings on enemy shores, in sieges, in assaults. All this seemed very simple to John, who would have liked to suggest modifications and additions to the lectures, but did not dare to do so for fear of being thrown out of the army for insolent pretension.

He also had frequent opportunity to practice athletic movements, from riding and hunting, swordsmanship, shooting with the pistol, to tennis and netball. He was often on the river, taking over from his boatman to go in close to the shores on either side, particularly down near the surviving London Bridge where great activity was going on to restore dwellings burned in the fire. It was astonishing how quickly the people were clearing up the ashes and rubbish left by the flames. Already those houses and public buildings only partly destroyed were being restored with brick or stone, in many places scavenged from

houses burned beyond repair or blown up for fire breaks.

'It is clear already,' Godolphin said on one such expedition, 'that no great overall plan will be accepted. It could not prevail.'

'It could not indeed,' John nodded. 'They would have to knock down nearly as much as the fire devoured.'

'You will find a new City when you come back from far Tangier,' his friend told him.

The delay began to irk John. He knew his own preparation was grossly inadequate. And though the soldiers were drilled and exercised fairly thoroughly, even the real professional army, he decided, was of a pitifully low standard of proficiency, while the wretched 'pressed' men, unsuited, unwilling, were worse than useless, a mere encumbrance they would be on any vessel or in any planned attack on land.

Thankfully he found when he got to Portsmouth that only regular troops would be employed in the Tangier expedition. So he made it his business to discover all he could about his shipmates, which meant he must first of all find the whereabouts of the vessel on which he was to travel.

With three companions he rode first to the headquarters where he had been told to report. It was late afternoon when they arrived, only to find the chief officers were not yet there. In their absence there had been total confusion, which had now begun to resolve itself into an unpleasant kind of order. For a volunteer captain, a middle-aged, loudmouthed individual, had taken upon himself to assume command, without troubling to discover if he had the senior position and was in any way entitled to promote himself.

'You, sir,' he accosted John, picking him out from his three companions by reason of his superior height and general alertness. 'You, boy! Ensign, are you? Your regiment? Answer me! These others? Answer! Speak up! No insolence, or I'll—'

John was stung into rapid speech and gave a simple, accurate, account of their journey, their names, their equipment. His manner was polite, without insolence or deference.

The bully was clearly taken aback. His dull mind had not grasped the wealth of detail that had been poured over him. A sneering voice from behind said 'Speak more slowly, young sir. Captain Trumble is sinking in your sea of information.'

Captain Trumble swung round. He wasted no words in rebuke

or counter abuse. His big hand flew out to strike the attacker's mouth with a resounding smack.

The growing crowd that had begun to titter fell silent instantly, though many hands reached for sword hilts. Lieutenant Lawson, white-faced with blood on his lips, was one of these. But he merely bowed, said in the same mocking voice, 'You will hear from me, sir, within the hour,' and walked away. Captain Trumble, also pale, called for a friend by name and when the latter reached his side, took his arm in a firm grip and led him off in the opposite direction.

'Better here and now than in Biscay,' said a voice that John recognised.

'Hugh!' he cried. 'Hugh Offord!'

It was indeed his childhood friend, unexpected, restored to him just as he had imagined himself bereft of any intimate to share this new adventure.

They had much to tell one another. Hugh's father had been restored to his parish and was content to build up his position there to all it had been before, much to the approval of his parishioners who wanted no more alarming innovations. But Hugh and his companions had not been content, especially after the Churchill family had left the neighbourhood. So he had sought and been given permission by his father to seek patronage from my Lord Silester, with whose help he had gained a commission as ensign in a west country regiment of foot.

'From which you have volunteered in like manner to myself?' John asked.

'You have it. And have been to that burned-out desert, the ruined London and also at Whitehall, for approval in several quarters and at last directed to join ship here in Portsmouth.'

John capped his friend's story with a short account of his own life at Court since he left St. Paul's School.

'Now burned to the ground together with the great church it was christened after,' he explained. 'My grandmother's house too, though it was pulled down to make a fire break.'

He explained how the King and his brother had fought to save the City while the inhabitants thought only of saving themselves and their goods.

'In which many of the rich merchants have succeeded remarkably well,' he went on. 'They have lost their Halls and in

a great measure their books and their papers, but I think they have preserved their gold.'

'And their will to continue in business,' said Hugh, who had heard much of this from clerical relations with whom he had lodged in the neighbourhood of Kensington village. They had preserved nothing, for their house near one of the City churches had been burned down with all its contents while they helped their older parishioners to escape.

'We shall see a great restoration made when we get back from this voyage,' John said.

He had grown very tired of stories of the Great Fire. At Court the topic had not been laboured, for few of the high nobles had suffered, or not directly. Any who had felt themselves threatened had been able to arrange early evacuation by cart or barge and the King had quickly suppressed what he considered to be idle and vulgar emotional gossip. A few ribald stories amused him, a few poor folk's tragedies touched his kind heart, but without sentimental overtones. The disaster remained a disaster, stark, dangerous, for the war with the Dutch continued and now there was less money than ever with which to supply the Fleet, that constant, necessary drain upon feeble resources.

Hugh Offord agreed. London would be built again. London's rich merchants would find a way of restoring its wealth. It was not their concern. They were off to those distant shores to prove themselves against strange foes, that he thought of vaguely as savages and yet at the same time romantic Moslem princes, turbanned, dark-skinned potentates, those cruel but honourable adversaries of the ancient crusades.

The Tangier expedition was a success as far as it went. The English presence was made secure, as were the fortifications, the mole, the harbour and the anchorage. In driving back the attackers Ensign Churchill distinguished himself for his command of his company of soldiers and for the vigour of their action. He accepted his superior officer's commendation with dignity, in silence. But later on, in private talk with Hugh Offord, he laughed over the action, belittling his own part in it.

'I found I could do nothing if I followed my orders precisely,' he said, grinning widely. 'It was suicide for us all. So I disregarded them and set out to win and hold our position by other means. I think he saw little difference, my poor captain.

Good was his name, but his strategy was bad, damned bad.'

'He had scarce time to see anything, I reckon,' said Hugh. 'It was but a few hours after he commended you that he fell to enemy fire, did he not?'

'True,' said John. 'By which time Lieutenant Lawson—'

'The same that shot Captain Trumble's firing arm to splinters at Portsmouth in their duel?'

'The same. Trumble lived, but lost the arm and resigned his commission. Lieutenant Lawson was cleared at his court martial. The provocation was patently the big bully's.'

'Since Lawson had volunteered for this expedition I wager it was thought too he might not return to make further brawls in England or elsewhere, innocent or not.'

'He supported my group with his larger body of men. For that I am eternally grateful to Lawson. For his invaluable help at a crucial moment.'

'Without revealing that your insubordination, we might almost call it mutiny, had contributed to Captain Good's early death?'

John aimed a blow at his friend, but missed his target and fell off his stool at Hugh's feet. He gathered himself up, not laughing now, but grim-faced, humiliated.

Hugh watched him with interest, in silence. John was not much changed from his early days. He was ready to join in any joke, take part in any violent action, all with the same happy vigour. But he had always taken himself seriously in their mock battles at Ashe and he was the same now, cheerful, light-hearted, but totally sure of his own judgment and never more dangerous than when he suffered a rebuff or felt himself mocked.

John sat down again upon his stool. Hugh continued to regard him in silence. When they spoke again it was of the strange beauty of the north African coast, its mixed population, the hot sun, the fierce colours of the market stalls in the little town below the castle, the violent white and black of peasant clothing, the mules, the camels, the babel of strange tongues.

Altogether John served for three years in the Mediterranean. He grew from a boy of eighteen to a young man of twenty-one.

Together with Hugh they earned the distinction and praise, and of more importance, skill and knowledge in their profession. When they returned to England both were determined to continue soldiering.

For John Churchill the prospects of so doing were fairly straightforward. He decided that he must renew his connections with the Court. His father still held his position there, he knew he could present himself again to the Duke of York and there was always that distant relative, that second cousin once removed, Barbara Villiers, now Duchess of Cleveland and still, to the surprise of many, holding her position of favour with King Charles.

For Hugh Offord the situation was somewhat different, but with John's help he was able to appear at Court from time to time in the intervals of his soldiering, very much surprised, bemused and part delighted, part shocked, by all he found there. His old father at Musbery read his much edited accounts of Whitehall with considerable astonishment but great pleasure at his son's obvious advancement.

Chapter Eight

While John had been upholding the supposed might of England in the Mediterranean much had happened at home to lower the nation's prestige with its neighbours and the respect of Englishmen for their government and more particularly for their King.

The war with the Dutch had not prospered. In fact quite the contrary. Partly because of the perverse meanness of Parliament, which hesitated to provide Charles with money on account of his known extravagance, his lavish gifts to unworthy followers, his wild pursuit of pleasure; but chiefly because such fears, though justified, meant that the Navy was deprived and the Fleet was run down most dangerously low; in fact reduced to such a condition that the major warships were laid up, unfit to go to sea, and the crews that should have manned them were dispersing for want of money to pay them their overdue wages. Apart altogether from these long arrears of pay, owing in some cases for months, even years.

As a consequence of this neglect, mismanagement and muddle, with its fearful result, the absence of any proper defence, the Dutch had been able to sail into the mouth of the Thames and had even penetrated to the Medway. There they destroyed the feeble opposition, captured some of the warships at anchor, burned others, and retreated to sea again in triumph. No wonder a shameful peace had to be made, which was really no peace at all but merely a respite in the war with the United Provinces.

All this John learned from Sidney Godolphin. He had renewed his friendship with the latter immediately upon his return, finding to his surprise that Godolphin too had finished his service as page to Charles and, in addition to being made a groom of the bedchamber, had been given a commission in the army.

'You have fought for your country?' John asked him. 'Where? When?'

'I have not left these shores,' Sidney answered. 'In fact I have

but learned that I could make but a very indifferent soldier. However, it is very plain we have not finished with the Dutch, so I must continue in the hope that I may be of some service unless his Majesty hath other plans for me.'

'While I look to the Duke and like most of my superior officers hope we may find employment abroad. Maybe in France, where I am told King Louis hath set up an English regiment for his coming attack on the old Spanish lands in Flanders, as a way to get at the Dutch.'

Godolphin sighed. 'You find this country of ours in a poor way, my friend?'

'Not London,' John answered, more cheerfully. 'I always said it would be transformed by the time I came home. And so it is. A grand re-birth. A fine inheritance for those who shall come after. I have walked these new wide streets and looked up to the tall roofs, and wondered how we ever endured the stifling squalor of the old town.'

'For those who shall come after,' Godolphin repeated seriously. 'Who will that be, I wonder?'

'Why, our heirs when we have them.'

'The King hath none. You have learned that, have you not?'

John was serious now. 'Nor His Highness, I have been told. Those two little Dukes are gone. Cambridge was the elder, was he not?'

'And the Queen barren. No hope there, after so many years. Four sons the Duchess bore to the Duke and all gone. All. While the King's bastards thrive.'

John laughed. 'So do my sister's. A girl as like his Highness as a mirror image and a tiny boy with Arabella's long face and big mouth.'

'You have seen her then?'

'Why not? She is still my sister and I still love her. Also my mother dotes upon her grandchildren. Only my Lady Drake will not have her name mentioned. But the old dragon hath gone to spend her last days at Ashe and those will not be long, I believe.'

Sidney looked thoughtful. 'Nor in the general opinion will those of her Highness.'

'The Duchess? She is in truth very ill, then? I did find a great change in her on my return, but thought this merely in contrast to the full-blown beauties I knew abroad.'

‘Not so. It is a wasting from some sickness that hath not been named.’

‘Poor lady. So there can be no hope of more young princes to put in place of these little lost Dukes?’

‘None whatever.’

After this conversation John considered it unwise to solicit the Duke’s help in furthering his career. But he continued to attend the Court upon all public occasions, to be seen with Godolphin, to help Hugh Offord, to visit his sister and her infant family.

So it was not long before he came to the notice of his cousin, now Duchess of Cleveland and to all appearance as firmly in the King’s favour as ever. Her confidante, a Mrs. Manly, brought a message to him from her mistress.

‘The Duchess is grieved you should regard your kinship so lightly you have not sought to present yourself to her Grace since your return.’

John was amused. His boyhood’s awe of the lady no longer embarrassed him or tied his tongue.

‘I thank you,’ he said gravely. ‘Pray take my best compliments to her Grace and say that I am ever ready to present them in person when and where she chooses to command me.’

He swept a graceful bow to the messenger who had been told to find a shy, awkward, but good-looking young man. This handsome cavalier quite took her breath away, which was apparent from her manner when she returned with Ensign Churchill’s message.

‘He continues his military career, then,’ her Grace remarked. ‘He has done well, as rumour told us, did it not? I must see him soon or he will be swept away to France to fight our battles there.’

Or Louis’s, which will be the same thing, she told herself. Though she had not been able to make Charles tell her the detail of his highly secret pact with his French cousin, she had guessed rightly that it rested upon a great sum of money, designed to rescue the King from the apparent ruin of his Navy, which in turn had come about through his extravagance. She remembered that last visit to Dover of Charles’s favourite, much-loved sister, followed so immediately upon ‘Madame’s’ return by her sudden agonising death. Everyone had concluded she was poisoned, but nothing was ever proved. An ill-wind, thought Barbara Villiers,

remembering too the return of ‘Madame’s’ lovely Breton lady-in-waiting, Louise de Kéroualle, who had at Dover caught the King’s eye and now—

A couple of days later John was summoned to attend the Duchess of Cleveland in her apartments at Whitehall. He had heard she was again housed conveniently near his Majesty. No one was surprised, for the connection seemed to be as firm as ever, quite unaffected by casual additions to Charles’s overall number of mistresses, which included not only the French woman, La Kéroualle, whom the Londoners called ‘Mrs. Carwell’, but also a notorious young woman of the people, a very popular actress at the King’s theatre in Drury Lane, now sufficiently rebuilt to be at work again. This girl had been selling oranges outside the theatre until her acting talent had been noticed and she was promoted to take comedy parts, to sing and dance in light productions.

As John, dressed very correctly in his uniform of an ensign, made his way to his cousin’s apartments, he thought of all the current gossip about Nell’s career, from the Drury Lane gutter to the King’s bed. This second cousin of his had climbed a similar ladder, but from less obscure origins. Where now was the former Mr. Palmer, that complaisant husband, the Earl of Castlemaine? Had she shaken him off at last, or had the poor man revolted? He meant to find out, if not today, then later. Unless this Barbara Villiers had withered like the Duchess of York. She, poor woman, seldom appeared now and in the last week or two, when she did attend with the Duke, had seemed to be a pale ghost of her former self. Sidney was right. It was not age, but dire disease.

The Duchess of Cleveland had not withered. To John’s astonished eyes she looked younger, fresher, even more beautiful than upon their last meeting at Thames-side before he sailed for Tangier. He found her reclining upon a narrow couch from which she did not get up, but merely extended a welcoming hand. Clearly he was intended to approach, perhaps even to kiss the hand so regally offered, palm downward.

John’s inner nature, so basically puritan, rebelled at this. The vision before him was lovely, enhanced by surroundings of quiet luxury, no doubt chosen by the good taste of Charles himself. The enchantress was dressed in the most exquisite gown or robe,

he could not tell which, informal, unrestraining, of a fine silk gauze, cream-coloured over a more substantial layer of palest pink. There was a profusion of delicate lace, not silver or gold as for those state occasions and court balls, where coloured finery and rich jewels dazzled the eye, but pure white that matched her Grace's perfect neck and half-exposed bosom. She wore no jewels of any kind.

'So,' she said, letting her hand sink back to her side, 'my little cousin John has become a man!'

John, who had swept her a very low bow as she began to speak, stepped forward.

'And my beautiful cousin Barbara is once more a girl,' he said smiling, wiping out his diffidence with a marked, if somewhat crude boldness that pleased as much as it surprised her. Sincere, too, she decided, looking at him closely with new eyes. And very handsome, both in face and figure. Tall, young, a quick intelligence, like her royal Master, an ally perhaps and again perhaps—

Their easy conversation, that lasted for the best part of an hour, continued with John seated upon an upright carved oak chair and Barbara still upon her couch but with her feet in their satin, beribboned slippers now upon the ground. In the course of it he gave his cousin a very full account of his life in the Mediterranean, the various actions in which he had fought, their results, his future prospects.

'My life must continue in the army,' he told her earnestly. 'I know that nothing else will content me.'

She laughed.

'Nothing else?' she mocked him. 'Nothing in life but hardship, danger and death. For yourself or for your enemy, poor souls.'

'I have no personal enmity towards any man,' he answered. 'I am concerned with the winning of battles to the best advantage of my King and country.'

There was a cold note in his voice that frightened her. So she stopped her raillery to say with a new seriousness. 'Are there not better things to win than battles? Better achievements – in the arts, in the new philosophies?' She added, in a lower voice, 'In the love of friends?'

She lifted such glowing, innocent eyes to his face that John forgot her position, her whole life and circumstances. She was

kind, she had showed him great indulgence, treating him as an equal. She had given him the intimate attention of a relative. Moreover she had a mind worthy of respect, a rare thing in women, his arrogant youth believed. Certainly his experience to date had done nothing to disprove this conclusion. His women in Africa, in the islands, had been little more than animals, however beautiful, however desirable. Cousin Barbara was more beautiful, more desirable in every possible way.

They parted in an atmosphere of mutual satisfaction, with promises on both sides to continue their acquaintanceship. When her Grace extended her hand in farewell, palm upwards this time, John took it gently, turned it over and planted on it a kiss that much exceeded the demands of formal politeness. In her pleasure at this the Duchess could barely restrain herself from planting a responding kiss upon the handsome natural curls lowered before her.

For John Churchill that leave-taking was fatal. Touch, the all-too intimate touch of his lips upon her hand, did more to convey to him her quality than all his foregoing delight in her surroundings, her personal appearance, her conversation. He went away sunk in a happy dream where her image lay as he had first seen her upon her couch, her hand outstretched in welcome. The hand he had for a brief moment possessed at parting. It was inevitable that his thoughts should progress naturally from that point.

He tried to busy himself with plans for his career and fortunately found some success in that direction. The Duke of York still graciously expressed an interest in the young man, bringing his name up for notice whenever this might advantage him. And certainly it seemed there would be work to do for young army officers, particularly overseas.

‘In France?’ Sir Winston asked his son, quite astonished at such a suggestion. ‘Under the French King? But are not the French our enemies? Open enemies? If not actually at this time quite openly at war with us?’

‘No,’ John answered firmly. ‘We are not openly at war with anyone. The Dutch peace of Breda—’

Sir Winston interrupted him.

‘That disgrace! That humiliation! I burn with shame when I think of how our Navy was abused, our brave seamen and their

captains betrayed.'

'Even so. But that is all over and indeed our Navy, or at least our merchant ships, turned temporary pirates, have taken many fair prizes of the Dutch treasure fleet coming up Channel from the far East.'

'I am very glad to hear it,' Sir Winston said, though Lady Churchill shook her head to think of the continuing strife and loss of brave men in spite of the so-called peace.

'As things are now,' John explained, 'the French have fallen out once more with the Dutch. King Louis would attack the States and for that he would increase his army, renewing the English contingent he hath always maintained, though in times past the men were chiefly Irish or Scottish dissidents from true English rule, whether king or usurper.'

'Then you would join these scum?' Sir Winston was indignant.

'If the King wills it,' John answered simply. He had heard, he could not fail to hear, the rumours going about the Court that Charles had secured or been forced to conclude a pact of treaty with his cousin to supply fighting men in return for much-needed gold. The matter could be considered base, as between national foes, or just as between natural allies. He was a soldier: politics were not his province.

In any case there were but two interests in his life at present, his career and his growing love for Barbara Villiers. They had met again and yet again. His infatuation was beginning to overwhelm him. He thought of her day and night; he made excuses to others to be by himself to think of her; he made excuses to himself to go where he might see her, even if this had to be in the company of the King, far across a great room or briefly passing in a corridor. In neither case able to acknowledge one another's presence. If a day passed when he had no sight or sound of her, he spent a sleepless night or one haunted by fearful dreams of her death or his own, eternal separation of one kind or another.

He had no means to relieve himself, since he knew nothing of poetry or any other form of writing. Where most of the gallants at the Court attempted verse whether they had talent for it or not, John despised them for simpering fools or knaves. Besides, he had never wished to display himself in any such activity; a hopeless passion for the King's principal mistress was something

that needed the most complete secrecy.

For he knew it to be hopeless. In his lucid moments, for great as it was his passion did not rule him utterly, he was able to see it clearly as an infatuation, neither more nor less. The Duchess was older than he by about six years; she had a husband still alive. Socially, if not morally, she was far removed from him. Their friendship, however deep, could not be lasting.

But he could not retreat from this love any more than he could ever bring himself to retreat in battle, except to gain ultimate victory. So in the end he found himself one day alone with her on his knees beside her couch imploring pity for his extreme of love, acceptance of his adoration of her incomparable beauty, relief from the fury of his passion.

She met all his demands, with a gentle dignity he had not expected and which raised his passion to ecstasy in the fulfillment of it. She was touched, had always been touched by his sincerity. She was very flattered by finding such feelings again and in such an attractive youth. It made her more secure in her relations with Charles, who in truth was becoming more and more like a husband to her with every year that passed.

At least that was how she chose to regard it. Until one afternoon, when the intrigue was a couple of months old and John had come to her rather late because he had been at audience with the Duke of York upon military matters.

Barbara was waiting for him, coolly prepared, delicious to see, to smell, to touch. He had begun to take off his jacket when a disturbance outside the apartment, followed by a frantic knock on the door, brought them both motionless, cold with shock.

'Your Grace, the King is without!' Mrs. Manly, the confidante, stood there trembling.

Without a word, his jacket still unfastened, John sprang to the window, pushed through the curtains, threw up the sash and leapt into the garden below.

'Close the window, madam,' said the Duchess of Cleveland, 'and go tell his Majesty that I am very happy to receive him.'

Chapter Nine

John's Fall was not severe, a six foot drop to a newly dug flower bed. But the shock of his narrow escape from the King's wrath was severe indeed and kept him shaking and pale-faced for the rest of that evening. As usual when he had met a problem to solve or a reverse to endure, he sought out his friend, Godolphin.

'If I had been caught with my coat half off my back it would have been impossible to explain my presence in her Grace's room.'

'Charles, as we know only too well, forestalls lame explanations with his own briskly accurate conclusions.'

'I had lost all chance to secure a fresh assignment,' John said gloomily.

'With the lady?'

'No, you fool! In my regiment! Abroad, as I had been hoping.'

Sidney looked at his friend, amusement in his shrewd eyes. 'You will go far, John. We have all seen you go about languishing for love and in heaven when success came at last. Yet now, after a dangerous setback that might put an end, in a prudent man's eyes, to such a reckless intrigue, you have no grief, no thought at all of your lady's plight. You think only of your career.'

'I exist only for that,' John answered.

'As the Lord liveth!' his friend exclaimed. 'I believe you speak the simple truth!'

They went on to discuss the matter more calmly. They agreed that John should not vary his general behaviour at all, certainly not the number of his appearances at the Court in Whitehall nor at St. James's. He must not avoid any of his former friends, certainly not those who had been inclined to tease him for his careful pursuit of the King's favourite and the unexpected depth of his involvement.

So he did his best to join in all the fashionable ploys, the gaming and gambling that he hated, the card games at which he might use his brains to win, though the usual stakes were higher

than he liked. He joined in parties for the theatre, more to watch the audience than the actors. Few of the plays held any interest for him. Shakespeare he found old-fashioned, Dryden too difficult, Andrew Marvell too poetical, Beaumont and Fletcher acceptable but dull, the new playwrights too bawdy.

But the crowds inside and outside the theatres were well worth his attention, he often thought as he stood waiting to go to his seat, his friends about him. Besides, a new fashion had arisen, invented in the first place by the Queen and her duchesses, her closest intimates. These ladies had always loved balls in fancy dress, masquerades and such like. On an impulse the Queen had suggested they might carry their disguises to the theatre in person, not as onlookers but themselves as performers.

So she with the Duchess of York and three other ladies of high rank had dressed themselves as orange girls and gone quietly in plain coaches to the narrow street behind Drury Lane and from there made their way, offering their wares to the audience going into the patched-up theatre from the front of that partly restored building. Their pretty, well-cared for faces and hands attracted much attention and rapid sales. When they had amused themselves enough, they quietly disappeared the way they had come.

These frolics soon became known at Court, and no sooner known but copied. Naturally this led to an added number of gallants who frequented the neighbourhood of the King's theatre and that of the Duke of York in Lincoln's Inn Fields, also restored to working shape and the production of plays. Not only gallants, but rogues of many sorts, for the word had also gone round the underworld that the fair ladies masquerading as orange girls might also be wearing some of their fine jewels, or if not valuable gems at least valuable gloves, scarves or other easily detachable articles of dress. The Queen's whim was not without an element of danger.

It was on this account that John agreed to go with Hugh Offord on one such occasion. Neither of them had any wish to attend the play and they chose an evening when the theatre entrance was lit by candlelight within and the torches of link boys outside in the street. John had made sure beforehand that none of the royal party would be there. He still felt a band of ice

about his middle when he thought of his last, just missed, encounter with the monarch.

'But will there be any but regular pedlars here?' Hugh asked, as they drew near to the lively scene. 'Do they cry their wares, these dressed-up ladies? For surely their voices and their speech would betray them?'

'Many are shrill enough, as I have heard them often,' John answered. 'And rude enough, I swear, to match Nell herself. We must draw closer. Now, beside that pillar there, one foot up on the step to support the basket on her knee—'

'Nell Gwyn?' asked Hugh eagerly. He had heard rumour of this latest actress to find favour with the King, but had no means of recognising her.

'No, no, She hath abandoned the oranges to her betters and taken to the stage, where she plays and dances most blatantly to the King if he be in the audience.'

'But you swore he would not appear tonight!'

'I prayed God he would not. Sidney promised me he would not. Now look! That is Lord Brouncker's brother in very deep conversation with a maid I dare swear is no common pedlar. Now she signals to her friend. They close ranks. Quick, we may find sport here!'

The two young men hurried past the lighted entrance to where Mr. Brouncker, who in his turn had been joined by a friend, was urging the two orange girls to move on with him.

'You will do me the honour of supping with me and my friend here?' he was saying, a hand on the arm of the one he had first encountered, a coarse leer on his face, an insult in his voice.

The girl drew back, so suddenly and sharply that she stepped on John's foot as he approached and would have fallen had he not caught and steadied her.

She did not cry out as he expected, which made him sure she was no City wench, but came from Whitehall. When she turned her head to thank him he was sure of it. He had seen her somewhere before. At St. James's, was it? Among the Duchess's ladies? And the second girl now clinging to her friend. He remembered both faces.

Mr. Brouncker pushed them roughly aside to get at John, his friend following. He found two youths where he had expected one, for Hugh had closed with his friend in like manner.

‘How dare you!’ Brouncker cried. ‘Laying your filthy hands on a lady! Get out of my sight, you puppy!’

The second lady gave a little whimpering cry and dropped her tray of oranges. They rolled about the pavement and the narrow street, making passers-by stumble or swerve. John, with the girl’s appealing hand in his, stepped back, Hugh closing in on her friend’s far side. The ill-intentioned pair lunged forward, Brouncker trod hard on an orange which spurted juice into his lowered face and stung his eyes so that he swore loudly. His friend protested.

‘It was to be a party of pleasure, Harry. You promised such. This pair, whoever they be, are unwilling. I’m for easier game.’

He began to turn away, but Brouncker swung him back. He was in a furious rage, trembling, unsteady on his feet, mopping at his still streaming eyes with a large, lace-bordered handkerchief. He was clearly more than a little drunk.

‘You shall not go!’ he yelled fiercely. ‘They were ours till these young swine appeared. You teach them a lesson, George! I can’t see! The witch spat poison in my eyes!’

‘Orange juice,’ corrected John. He and Hugh had put the girls behind them with a whispered order to run away.

Brouncker fumbled for his sword hilt. His friend said firmly, ‘No. They have done nothing. Come away!’

He turned to go away, but Brouncker had found his weapon. He drew, with a grating sound that brought his friend swinging round, his own weapon ready, but still crying, ‘There is no quarrel you fool! Put up! Put up!’

Hugh and John whipped out their swords and watched, astonished, but alert. The challenge had been so sudden, with none of the correct formalities, the supporters, the chosen weapons, places and time. It was a mere vulgar brawl, between so-called friends, too.

The battle was brief, clumsy, vicious. It ended with Brouncker staggering away, his naked sword still in his hand and his friend lying on the ground, blood pouring from a wound in his upper arm.

John with Hugh’s help did what he could. They bandaged the arm with the broad sash taken from the victim’s waist. They found one of the new sedan chairs and engaged it to take him to his home where he could call a doctor to be brought to him.

‘I recognised Mr. Brouncker, sir,’ John told him. ‘But you have the advantage of me.’

‘Paul Hayward,’ the other answered faintly, lying back in the chair. ‘Harry and my lord his brother are my closest friends.’

He stopped speaking and John thought he had fainted. The men carrying the chair hurried away with him.

‘Please God they deliver him alive,’ Hugh said, watch-in the chair as it settled to a steady pace moving into the distance.

‘And do not abandon him on the way for fear they be accused of his death,’ John added.

They turned, only to find the two girls terrified, clinging together, too shocked to remove themselves from the spot. Once more John took charge of the situation, this time to find a coach into which all four of them mounted.

At first the girls protested, perhaps afraid they had escaped one peril only to fall into another. But John introduced himself and Hugh as officers in the King’s troop of Guards, which Hugh amended to declare his true regiment, at which one of the ladies smiled and the other nodded and both looked relieved.

‘And you, madam,’ John said to the one he thought he recognised most clearly. ‘Am I in error in believing you serve the Duchess of York? I speak as a one-time page in his Highness’s household.’

‘I am indeed maid of honour to her Highness,’ she answered. ‘Frances Jennings at your service,’ she added, with a sparkle in her eye that defied him to misinterpret the formal phrase.

‘And this lady likewise?’ Hugh asked, for of the two he found the weaker one, drooping and wilting from her fright, the more attractive.

‘Miss Price is my friend and colleague,’ Miss Jennings answered for her.

So the quartette travelled on in peace, exchanging trivial conversation as they went. By the time they reached the palace of St. James’s, the girls had quite recovered their composure and the good spirits which had led them into their rash adventure. They thanked their rescuers most prettily as they were handed out of the coach. To John’s surprise his usually shy friend expressed an ardent wish that they might renew their acquaintanceship, which compliment Miss Price accepted with enthusiasm and Miss Jennings with a meaning glance at John.

The young men delivered their charges to the care of their governess who hurried out to greet them and heard their account of their adventure with marked displeasure, after which with scanty thanks to their rescuers she swept them away.

The hackney coach meanwhile, having been paid off by John while Hugh helped the ladies to alight, had driven away.

'And now,' John said, turning a laughing face to his friend, 'What further joys for this strange evening? You would sample cards? A concert of music? I fear there is no larger entertainment to offer you.'

'I want nothing more,' Hugh said. His mind was still full of the sweet sad face of Miss Price, the way she had clung to him at the height of her terror when Brouncker and Hayward made their brutal advances.

'I am still curious to know if our wounded man succeeded in reaching his home,' John said. 'Also I would retrieve my sash.'

'Your sash? Did you not use his own?'

'To bind about the arm, yes. But I made a sling for that member with my own. I must at all cost get it back before it can be produced at any public enquiry into the instant duel.'

'But we took no part in it.'

'Have we any witness to that? It would not be my first duel – which is known of me, I fear.'

'Do you know where to find this Hayward?'

'I heard where he directed his chair to take him.'

It was not yet midnight, so there were lights in many of the houses in Westminster and though there were still bare gaps or burned ruins about Charing Cross and along the Strand there were plenty of people walking in pairs or groups, some with their own servants carrying lanterns, some lighted by hired link boys. John and Hugh managed without help and arrived on the right doorstep, where many lights behind drawn curtains in both downstairs and upstairs rooms suggested there was unusual activity within.

This proved to be the case. A very young footman answered their knock, a distracted housekeeper allowed them in, chiefly to avoid long explanations in the street. The master was very ill, she declared shrilly; he had lost a great quantity of blood on his way home. If it had not been the kind services of a young stranger—'

‘I am he,’ John said firmly. ‘And I am come hither to inquire after Mr. Hayward’s health and—’

Here the housekeeper cried out, indignantly, ‘And a reward, I suppose? He is too ill! The surgeons are with him. You must come again but go now! Go at *once*!’

‘Madam,’ John said impatiently. ‘I want nothing save my sash, that I fastened about your master’s arm after I had used his own to bandage it.’

‘Go, my good woman,’ Hugh added, amazed that his friend’s motive should be questioned. ‘The sash, bloodstained or torn, it does not matter.’

The housekeeper showed affront at being so spoken to by yet another young spark. There had been far too many of these worthless hangers-on of the Court swarming about her door for the last couple of hours. Up to no good, that was certain! Brouncker men for the most part, seeking news that would send him fleeing abroad before early dawn or merely to his country home in the Midlands.

Nevertheless she did go away to inquire into the truth of John’s request, leaving the pair in the charge of the young footman, who clearly had no intention of interfering with anything the two strangers chose to do in that house. They had swords by their sides, they were gentlemen. He stood against the wall, well clear of the door through which he hoped they would soon choose to pass.

The housekeeper came back presently with John’s sash bundled up in a ragged but clean napkin. Mr. Hayward sent his best thanks for their timely aid, assured them he had no intention of bringing them into this unfortunate affair, which he hoped he might survive, God willing.

‘He gave all of this message?’ John asked, surprised.

‘He mends a little,’ answered the housekeeper. ‘The surgeon is better pleased now.’

In fact the wounded man did survive and in due course was well enough to accept Brouncker’s apology and his offer of a renewal of their friendship. Mr. Hayward accepted the apology but ignored the rest. He retired into the country, where his lecherous habits met with rougher but less dangerous hazards from the peasantry than at the royal Courts in London.

As for Brouncker, this typical example of his vicious, brutal

behaviour did finally bring about his dismissal by the King, who ordered him to retire from his post with the Duke of York and to leave the capital for good.

None too soon, for he might well have been accused of a worse crime than an uncalled for attack upon a close friend. Rumour had spread since the early days of the first Dutch war and had never been countered that he had given an order while serving in the warship ‘Royal Charles’, purporting to come from his master, the Duke, to call off the action of pursuit. The Dutch, in defeat, were fleeing for home. If they had been followed at speed more of their ships might have been taken or destroyed. The Duke of York denied he had given the order; Brouncker swore he had merely transmitted it, assuming it came from his Highness. Neither the captain of the ship nor the officers of the fighting men on board confessed to inventing an order; on the contrary, they were highly disappointed, having hoped to secure a valuable prize.

And so the matter had rested for a time until Parliament showed signs of taking it up, whereupon Brouncker fled the country and remained in exile.

Chapter Ten

John and his friends followed the outcome of the duel with interest. Their discreet questions roused no suspicion in any mind. After all, duels, many of them with fatal results for at least one member of either side, took place with dismal frequency in the close-knit, unnatural and under-employed community of the royal Courts. Duels were against the law but no law could control bad temper, unprincipled ambition or spite. Besides, violence, wounding and sudden death were not confined to the upper layers of society; they were common to all. And the suffering involved was greatly exceeded in many dreadful diseases for which there was no cure and no relief but death.

Just such a death came to the Duchess of York very soon after the Brouncker affair had finally ceased to have any interest whatever at the Court of St. James. She had suffered long from a cancer of the breast with all the attendant horrors of crude medical treatment adding to her misery. If she found any relief, any courage to endure, it may be put down to the constant spiritual help she received from the Catholic priests in attendance upon her.

For a year or more she had been a devoted convert to the Church of Rome and openly known to be such. The Duke was of the same persuasion, but still tried to hide it publicly because he was the only male heir to the throne. Of all Anne's eight children, her four sons had died in infancy or early childhood. Only the Princesses Mary and Anne were now growing up into adolescence.

'The Duke must marry again,' Sidney remarked to John as they walked in the Park a few days after the funeral of the Duchess. 'He is still capable of getting England an heir, whereas the King, I think, will never find an excuse to divorce the Queen. He is too fond of her.'

'They say he may seek to make Monmouth legitimate.'

'Never! He dotes upon him and his young Duchess but he knows him too well. And for all he hath such close feelings for

the French he knows his countrymen too well. They have known Monmouth from childhood to be a bastard. Charles could not bring himself to alter that opinion by falsely pretending otherwise …'

'God be thanked for that!' John said fervently. 'I trust Charles always to be prudent. Moreover my suit to his Majesty for service overseas may prosper shortly, if he wishes to give real military aid to his cousin, Louis.'

'Because there will be war again with the Dutch? What have you heard?'

'Nothing directly. But the Duke's household seem to believe his Highness prepares to go to sea against the Dutch ships that have come out from their harbours. And this time he will not stand for his orders going astray, nor leave his ships to be mishandled by that bungler, Prince Rupert, nor the sometime general, Albemarle.'

'Not so loud!' Sidney urged him. 'Greater men than you have lost their heads for such treasonable speech!'

'No treason,' John grumbled. 'The plain truth of the matter.'

But he looked about him all the same, relieved to find that no one was walking so near he could have overheard this outburst.

Within the next few weeks young Churchill met with a certain qualified success. His efforts for employment were rewarded. He found himself promoted to captain, a double remove, in a foot regiment of six thousand men under the command of the Duke of Monmouth. To serve in Flanders. They were to assemble at once for a short spell of training before being drafted abroad to join the French army under Marshall Turenne.

John took the news to the Duchess of Cleveland. He had continued his intrigue with her when they had both recovered from their fright when Charles arrived all unexpectedly at her door. Her Grace had found the incident stimulating, the young man's courage and persistence very flattering and the pleasure of his love-making considerable.

She greeted his news with congratulations, ready to tease him gaily for deserting her.

'You would not have me neglect my career altogether?' he answered. 'Mope around with my heart on my sleeve?'

'Of course I would,' she told him. 'Anything less diminishes me, insults my beauty, my charms—'

‘They cannot be diminished. They are as indestructible as those of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra. I go to prove myself worthy of you, my love. Oh, my love!’

‘Liar!’ she whispered, but did not continue her raillery.

When he left her, promising to come once more unless his orders to embark prevented it, Barbara made him a present that astonished him. He tried to reject it, but reluctantly. She continued to press him, amused by his clearly half-hearted protests.

‘You must present yourself and maintain yourself in dignity with those rich French officers, so ready to despise us and all our ways. The French live in the past, they always have and always will. They remember Charles as a poverty-stricken exile. They know that their king helps him still. They expect his army to come with their wages owing and their uniforms in rags.’

In the face of this eloquence John allowed his reluctance to vanish and replaced it with very sincere gratitude. Before he left for France he invested a substantial sum with Lord Halifax, who dealt at that time in the newly invented provision of life insurance and annuities.

‘I play,’ he explained to any of his friends who came to hear of it. ‘I play prudently, but I never gamble. I often win.’

They could not deny this statement, though in their experience John Churchill had never appeared to win very much at cards or any other game of skill.

King Louis of France had opened his attack upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands and Holland that year, having secured England as an open ally. The former peace between Charles and the Dutch Republic was over, broken according to the English by the emergence once more of the Dutch warships in aggressive order of battle. The Duke of York, still Lord High Admiral, sailed with the home fleet in person, achieving a notable victory off the enemy coast.

So when the Duke of Monmouth took his English troops, including Captain Churchill, across the Channel, the move was popular in the country, supported by the Court party in the House of Lords and not opposed by the House of Commons. All they knew, all they had been told was that the visit a few years

earlier by the King's favourite sister, his beloved 'Minette', wife of Louis's younger brother, had been a family affair. Not a secret treaty, signed at the happy reunion in Dover, whereby the army had been handed over to the all-powerful Sun King for a considerable sum of money and the promise of much more.

In the campaigns of conquest abroad young Churchill was able to develop his talents and enlarge his experience. Though as part of the English forces he was under the command of the Duke of Monmouth, their overall strategy was directed by the famous French general, Turenne himself. Churchill's innate military genius recognised, approved of and rejoiced in that leader's planned disposal of the troops. He understood what he and his soldiers were intended to achieve. When it came to his own personal involvement he went into battle with all the necessary enthusiasm and self-confidence, the full determination to succeed.

The French general had in earlier campaigns admired a contingent of Irishmen who had fought for him when they had failed to support Charles I in his effort to save his throne. He had admired those English troops who had for many years now taken service under the Princes of Orange. He expected a certain flair for close fighting, a certain doggedness in resisting the superior power of the Emperor, when Spain and Austria had ruled Europe with a heavy hand. But in John Churchill he recognised more than these admirable qualities. He noticed a quick, cool, military mind at work and did not hesitate to remark upon it.

At the battle of Nymegen the fighting was particularly bitter. The French advanced with their usual rapidity, but were later halted and thrown back from some of the posts they had taken. Marshall Turenne regrouped his forces. He directed the Duke of Monmouth to employ Captain Churchill with a company of his own choosing to recapture one of these posts. He even made a bet with his personal staff officers that 'my handsome Englishman' would succeed.

He was right. John brought off the action, using half the number of men who had failed to hold the post in the Dutch counter-attack.

The French advance continued, biting still further into the Netherlands, sweeping up the former Spanish conquests, for

Spain was now a spent force, her empire falling apart on both sides of the Atlantic. In June of the following year Turenne was laying siege to Maastricht, the great fortress that guarded the way to the heart of Holland. It resisted the French attack with a courage born of desperation.

But speed was essential. The French Marshall understood the logistics of conquest. The deeper the advance into enemy country the more difficult the problems of supply, in men, in horses, in food, in transport of the great guns, in the supply of ammunition of all kinds.

Campaign sieges were dependent upon the weather, too. In the northern parts of the Continent they depended particularly upon the summer months, perhaps, with luck, up to the early autumn. After that the armies must settle into winter quarters and these preferably not still in siege positions around a town or fortress. Maastricht was both.

Therefore Turenne demanded and got an almost unbelievable response from his army. The fortress with its elaborate defences had been considered impregnable. It fell, at great cost to both the defenders and the attack. And again John Churchill distinguished himself. With the Duke of Monmouth, who did not lack physical courage though his mind worked slowly, he was one of a group of twelve volunteers who made a desperate but successful assault that breached the walls at a vital point.

'I owe my life to this man, sir,' Monmouth said, presenting John to his father when they were next in England.

Charles, who had remained impassive during Monmouth's spirited recital of their joint exploit, in which he gave himself all necessary credit, turned to Churchill at the end of it.

'A debt we join in honouring, captain,' he said gravely.

The captain bowed his thanks for this acknowledgement, but when, later on, he described his adventures in battle to Sidney Godolphin, he said, 'His Majesty spoke of honouring his debt to me for his son's life, but there hath been no material result of this honouring.'

'Did you expect any?'

'I did not. I praise God my army pay is not to be withheld. Or not for very long. And that, I do believe, comes from France.'

And so did the most tangible reward John received. In April of the following year King Louis gave him a commission as Colonel

of the English regiment in the French army.

Meanwhile Captain Churchill, as he still was, remained in England attending the two Courts, visiting his parents and his sister, whose establishment was enlarged in prosperity and persons as her family increased. And without the usual number of infant deaths that seemed to dog the efforts of the Stuarts to continue their dynasty. Arabella's two little sons were healthy and she was again pregnant.

But the Duke of York was making arrangements to marry again. His choice, prompted as usual by Louis, lay with an Italian princess, Mary Beatrice of Modena, whose father was dead and her mother, a devout Catholic, could not withstand the very generous dowry proposed by the King of France, backed by the knowledge that James was now an open convert, the heir to the throne of England. She imagined the future held the promise of a re-conversion of that heretic land to the true faith.

'You wish to become a nun, my daughter,' Mary Beatrice's confessor told the girl. 'But it will be a greater sacrifice to become the means of saving those five million souls from hell.'

This was perhaps the converse of King Charles's remark upon the looks and characters of his brother's mistresses when he declared they must have been chosen by his confessor as a penance for his sins.

So the poor young innocent Italian princess was married to James Duke of York by proxy of Lord Peterborough, who then escorted her to England and was much disappointed when his tour of duty ended, for he had found his charge both charming, pathetic and desirable. But he was relieved of his position at Dover by her middle-aged husband himself, who married her again in person, very quietly, for the match was extremely unpopular with the people.

At this time the feeling against Papists had grown to such an extent that Parliament had repealed the former act to promote tolerance of all sects of Christians and had replaced it by a new Test Act, whereby all who held office were obliged to swear allegiance to the Anglican Church and take the sacrament according to the Anglican ritual. This James could not do now and so left the Admiralty for good in spite of his overall success as Lord High Admiral.

But the Duke of Monmouth pronounced himself a true

Protestant. One of his reasons for being in England that year and the next was in order to proclaim his faith and comply with the Test. He saw, or others explained it to him, that should the new Duchess of York have a son, who would inevitably be second in the line of succession, his own doubtful prospect of becoming his father's heir would fade even further into the background than at present.

As for John Churchill, his Protestant outlook and allegiance never wavered. He took the Test as a matter of course, being an officer of the Crown. None of his fellow officers gave it even as much thought as he did. After all there was no similar ban at that time in France that would alter his new position in Louis's troops.

The Duchess of Cleveland teased him about it. He had come to her as a matter of course, tall, mature, more handsome than ever, no longer a boy nor even a young man obsessed with first love, full of romantic visions, but a man arrogantly sure of himself and his power to bestow perhaps more than he would receive. Her Grace was sadly aware of the disparity in age between them. But she was willing to renew their friendship upon his terms, upon any terms, for her hold upon the King had slackened considerably in the last two years.

'You have been shocked, I warrant, by your old Master's fall from grace,' she said, when he told her about the Duke of Monmouth's taking the Test to win favour with his father and with the Parliament.

'With his father I doubt if Monmouth hath increased his favour,' John answered. 'The King loves him but will never, I think, do anything to make him legitimate. As for the Duke of York, yes, I grieve his loss to the Navy, for neither the Prince Rupert nor my Lord Albemarle had any success of any kind and this makes the people mad against the French.'

'The French!' the Duchess said with a bitter laugh. 'Do not remind me of the French!'

John did not fully understand then why she spoke so slightingly of their great ally; he thought she meant her rival with Charles, the French spy, 'Mrs. Carwell'. But later, when he was spending an evening with Hugh Offord, he brought the conversation round to the Duke of York arid his affairs.

'You have not told me,' he said, 'why you are here again in

London of a sudden. I understand you were with your regiment again in the West country.'

Hugh blushed and lowered his head at first but then looked up and smiled. 'I follow my destiny,' he said, using a well-known phrase.

'You mean some wench or other? Is Bristol so destitute?'

'By no means. This is more serious. Most serious.'

'Tell me – if you can. If you betray no desperate secret.'

He spoke lightly, which made Hugh laugh. 'No secret but my own sorrow, or constancy, or foolishness.'

'Well then. Tell me.'

'You remember that evening we played the knight errant outside the Duke's theatre, when the play was nought and we rescued the two orange girls that turned out—'

'To be two silly maids of honour, risking their honour, indeed apeing low wenches, which they were not, and known by Henry Brouncker to be come from the palace.'

'Miss Frances Jennings and Miss Price.'

John waited but Hugh did not go on.

'Miss Frances Jennings and Miss Price. What of them?'

'Not directly of them. Of another, who was with them when I called to pay my respects and inquire for their well-being.'

''S truth! Such eagerness! I confess I never gave them another thought. But this other? She caught your eye, did she?'

Hugh had to laugh again. 'They were lively, all three. 'But Miss Firle. Dorothea Firle—'

It was John's turn to laugh. 'Why have I never found you until today? I have been back from the wars two full months. While you have been about the Court in a full bevy of kind ladies, gaming, dancing, singing, at balls, masques,—'

'No, no! I am here but for two days. It is all upset, all changed, that happiness of three weeks soon passed, for Miss Price was sent into the country and forbid the Court for indiscretion over a lost love, and Miss Jennings was assailed for a time by my Lord Talbot, but he wanted no marriage. No more did Jermyn, lately returned and with whom she was inclined to fall in love.'

'My God!' John interrupted. 'You are worse than a low Presbyterian preacher describing hell! So what of that true love of yours, Miss Dorothea Firle? She hath not fallen to the smallpox, I hope?'

‘She was asked in marriage of a worthy knight and the parents forbid it. So what chance is there on this earth for me? None.’

‘You have answered yourself, but explained nothing. Did the lady love her admirer?’

‘She was ready to love a fortune and a title.’

‘It was *her* parents then that forbid it?’

‘The title was a minor one earned by his father. The fortune ill-spent already. The man was bankrupt and hath gone abroad. She was saved from going with him to a life of misery. But her heart is broken.’

John nodded. His friend’s position was serious, if indeed his love was as deep as he professed it to be. But it was in no way desperate.

‘Have comfort,’ he said. ‘May you not win the lady on the rebound, as it were? Broken hearts mend easily in Court circles.’

‘On a captain’s pay?’

‘Ah! You have had promotion!’

‘A plodding one. I look no higher for many years.’

His tone was very bitter, which caused John some embarrassment for he could hardly blame his friend’s superior officers when the whole organisation and payment of soldiers was so much at fault and therefore overwhelmingly insecure.

Besides, constancy was not a virtue John was eager to pursue. He knew perfectly well that his intrigue with Barbara Villiers was risky, most indiscreet and of its nature temporary. He had not so far in his life sought marriage. He had not even considered it. He clung still to his first real love but he knew in his heart that it was fading.

Its total collapse was brought a long step nearer by a second dangerous interruption, again from the arrival of the King himself.

This time there was less warning. No time at all to dress or even to jump from the window half clothed.

‘The cupboard!’ her Grace directed in a desperate whisper.

John tumbled in, pulling the door shut behind him.

But Charles, whose observant eye had never lost its early training in the detection of hidden perils, had seen the cupboard door fall shut, so gently that it madeono noise. While Barbara on the couch tried with an ardent welcome to distract her royal lover’s attention from the cupboard, he continued to stare

beyond her and finally strode across to drag open the door.

John dropped out upon his knees, a truly ridiculous sight, his breast bare, his shirt open, flowing wide over his unbuttoned breeches, his stockings down to his ankles, his natural dark curls dishevelled, falling about his face and neck. He dared not move until the King's foot struck his side sharply and the King's voice said with even greater icy sharpness, 'Rise, coward rogue!'

Young Churchill leaped to his feet, stung to anger even in the depths of his misery.

'So,' said Charles, 'it is our army's hero, is it? Our new military genius? Our Cousin France's discovered miracle!'

John stood his ground, erect, a respectful eye level with his Master's, for he had grown to be the King's height. He held himself in parade ground rigidity, expressionless, because he believed he had nothing left but his courage and that must stand against his despair.

Charles liked what he saw. All this time he had neither looked at his mistress, nor spoken one word to her and she, after her first false welcome, had held her tongue, waiting with confidence for his quick anger to fade into indifference. She knew his self-control to be infinite.

At last he broke the uneasy silence. 'You are a rascal,' he said to John, his wide mouth curved in contempt.

'But I forgive you, for I know that you do it to get your bread.' And with that he turned away and left the room.

In silence, with inward curses and tears of humiliation at those spoken and implied insults, the casual lovers dressed and tidied themselves until, with further tears for their disappointment they parted, each of them sufficiently restored to play their accustomed parts in public.

And so the Court knew nothing of the incident until a long time later, when it need cause no stir and no danger to anyone and only went to confirm the settled opinions the world, or at least the Court, held of those three involved.

But it did become a matter of fact and also of informed conjecture, that Colonel John Churchill had enlarged his holding with Lord Halifax to a probable maximum of 5,000 pounds.

And it did become a surmise, upon no direct evidence, for there could be none, that the Duchess of Cleveland's fourth and last child, with nothing of the Stuart in his appearance or

character, had been sired by the future Duke of Marlborough, himself —

Chapter Eleven

Though John put on a brave face to the world after his dangerous encounter with the King, he avoided Court functions for several weeks, largely on the advice of his friend, Godolphin.

'His Majesty's behaviour was typical of him,' Sidney remarked. He had been shocked by John's account of the unhappy incident, not indeed by the moral aspect, which was deplorable but only too common, but by the recklessness that set it off.

'You are quite old enough to show more sense,' he scolded. 'Charles will never abandon her Grace entirely, though she has a very serious rival in his French mistress. You have heard she is created Duchess of Portsmouth?'

'I heard,' John answered. 'Moreover I have seen her. A notable beauty indeed.'

'Just so. But Charles will never abandon Castlemaine. He hath known her too long, been faithful to her, after his own special fashion, too long.'

'A very special fashion!' John exclaimed, but could not excuse his own folly, even to himself. 'What irks me most,' he went on, 'is that insult implying I sold myself like any common prostitute. He must know the whole of my circumstances, my careful savings, my thrift—'

He stopped, for he had never told Godolphin the true source of his investments with Lord Halifax. And yet the King must have that knowledge to have used his cruel wit as he had.

'The King makes it his business to know all that concerns his throne,' Sidney answered. 'People imagine he is indifferent to all but his personal pleasures and the magnificence, the luxury of his Court, that he is lazy in business of State, disregards its needs, appoints useless ministers. I don't agree.'

He spoke with passion in defence of his Master. John had nothing to bring forward in his own defence. He had been reminded very sharply of the King's abilities, his shrewdness, his wit, his kind-hearted tolerance and his overwhelming royal presence. Though he could show unlimited courage in war John

was genuinely frightened not only of Charles, the King, Lord and Master, but of Charles the man, the rival in love, the supreme rival in love.

Encouraged by Sidney he decided to take this opportunity to pay a visit to his grandmother at Ashe, combining it with an inspection of his father's family home at Wootton Glanville. He found it easy to get leave from his regiment. Hugh Offord was also about to go back to Bristol. So the two young men set out together on horseback.

Old Lady Drake received her grandson with guarded pleasure. She was clearly very frail, a crumpled, skinny figure, sunk in an oaken armchair padded well with cushions, her knees covered by a thick woolen rug, though the season was mid-autumn and the weather mild.

John gave her news of his mother and father, who still held office in the King's household. He described their new house near the village of Knightsbridge to the west of the royal parks. But when he began to speak of Arabella, Lady Drake stopped him with a return of her old manner.

'I want no news of that arrant whore!' she cried. 'They tell me she is unrepentant, glorying in her adultery, displaying the fruits of it most shamelessly, even now when her royal partner in sin hath doubled his fault by his apostasy.'

She would have gone on, but a fit of coughing nearly choked her. John lifted her up, patted her shrunken back, piled up her cushions behind her and let her sink back, panting and trembling but no longer in danger of suffocation. He would have liked to explain Arabella's position, particularly how her sin was regarded as nothing unusual, certainly not unfortunate but rather the opposite. Also that it would not, in the nature of such things, be permanent, but might well lead in time to an advantageous marriage to some worthy partner who thought it no shame to marry a former royal mistress, moreover one who had proved her ability to breed and had managed to secure a very useful fortune.

But John knew he must not attempt any such explanation, so he began to describe the re-building of London, the speed with which it was being achieved, the new wide streets, the large brick and stone facades, the wonderful designs of Mr. Wren and others.

‘There have been one or two fires lately,’ he said. ‘But in these new brick houses. And the walls hold, it is all kept within, and falls down inside without spreading to the houses nearby.’

‘That is wonderful indeed,’ said old Lady Drake. ‘Nevertheless, stone-built Ashe burned when those wicked men attacked me, calling themselves loyal and daring to call me traitor.’

‘You have had an ample revenge, my lady,’ her grandson told her. ‘I remember well that sad pile of ruins, grassed over like any ancient castle of the old knights in armour. Now all is well preserved, most splendid to see on the approach.’

It was indeed. John wished his friend Hugh had stayed to meet the old lady before riding on to Musbery to find his family at the rectory there.

For the old wing where the Churchills had lived was now the main part of the house, with new, much smaller wings on either side. All the ruins had been dug out and removed, though much of the stone had been used in the restoration and rebuilding. Formal gardens had been laid out and cultivated with paths and topiary and smooth lawns. A walled garden, using the stone sides of the old stable yard, was laid out with fruit trees and beds of all the culinary herbs, neatly marked by small box borders. The large windows of the house were mullioned, the chimneys tall and twisted in the earlier Jacobean style.

John’s admiration was deep and genuine, but he could not help feeling some nostalgic pangs as he tried to identify the scenes of his earliest martial efforts. The task was beyond him, the changes and improvements far too great.

‘I walked my grandmother’s grounds for a whole hour last evening,’ he told Hugh when he visited the rectory next day. ‘But I could not find even a trace of that old underground passage we used so successfully.’

‘It was filled in,’ Hugh told him, ‘after they had taken the walls for the new kitchens and dairy. But you must ask my father. He watched the work being done.’

John not only listened to the Reverend Offord’s very long lecture on the subject, but he searched Musbery for news of those other companions of his childhood with whom he had played and fought in the years before the Restoration. Hugh Offord had always been his second in command, but there was a cousin of some sort, Matthew Stone, and a lad about the house,

strong but slow in the mind, Tom Smith. He was surprised to find the names coming back to him so readily and said so to Hugh.

'Not so very surprising,' his friend suggested. 'They all stayed on at Ashe for the years my Lady Drake was in London and until she gained her compensation and began to re-build. You must have heard her speak of them and their fidelity.'

'I suppose so. Hard to recollect now. We thought forward not backward in the school years. I may have heard their names, I may not. Now that I am of an age to think back in time, they have come to me without effort and I am astonished.'

'What of the enemy, as we called them? Can you remember their names, too?'

John laughed. 'You win. I have not the faintest recollection.'

'Not even of Will Hayden, Farmer Hayden's boy, who now runs that prosperous farm, since the old man was gored by his bull last summer and is lame since.'

'Only lame?'

'By good chance the bull caught him in the upper thigh and threw him over the hedge and out of the field or it would have killed him.'

'I must go see them both,' John said very seriously. 'Will can tell me how the people feel in these parts.'

Hugh nodded, though he did not fully understand his friend's meaning. However it was time to go in to the rectory dinner, where Hugh's mother and two unmarried sisters presented a meal of solid worth, local beef and vegetables and fruit and fresh trout from a stream nearby that flowed into the river Axe.

Hugh had to go on to Bristol the next day to rejoin his regiment which formed the garrisons of all the principal strong points across the western peninsula of Devon and Cornwall. John stayed on for a few days at Ashe, mainly in order to seek out and question those early friends of his. For he realised, he could not fail to realise, that the climate of opinion here, so far away from Westminster, was as unlike that of Whitehall as the burning suns and deserts of Tangier were to a Scottish winter.

Scottish in the sense of being Presbyterian by religion, or at least that way inclined. Though the rector was a conventional Anglican of the Church of England and used the prescribed ritual in his church, which everyone was by law obliged to

attend, many of the local community leaned towards a more Puritan approach to worship, particularly the farmers and small traders, the weavers, cloth-makers and other skilled craftsmen.

On one subject, however, they were all firmly agreed. They hated Popery and the Papists with a deep and bitter hatred. Their memory of the old Queen Mary with her Spanish Catholic husband and the later attack by the Spanish Armada, had never faded from their songs and sayings. The evil Spanish, with their fires and their galleys, lived again in the recent confusion of foreign wars afflicting the country. Would they never be rid of Papists? Was it true that his Highness, the Duke of York, had followed his late Duchess in a sinful conversion?

John found his old companions and adversaries very interested in this question. It was true, he had to agree, that he had fought with the French under the Duke of Monmouth and against the Dutch. The great French Marshal Turenne was in overall command. With the conclusion of the Dutch war the English troops had left, or were leaving France. Will Hayden pursued the subject.

'But France is our enemy! Was it not the French that fired London?'

'There was no proof of it,' John answered stoutly. 'I have never believed it. Moreover our King has had close ties with France all his life. His mother, his much-loved sister—'

'She that earned a swift death for visiting her brother at Dover, we are told.'

'No one knows the truth of that sudden tragedy. But I have heard his Majesty kept his grief in silence and privacy when the news came to him. He loved that youngest sister more than any other being on earth, it is said. And the visit had been merry above the ordinary of State occasions.'

'With a great exchange of promises, backed by money,' suggested Will. 'We may be far from London, but we have our sources of information,'

When John left Ashe he rode to Wootton Glanville, where he found all well, the estate in capable hands, his father's old manservant, Trubb, retired some years since, still active and alive about his small garden behind one of the large gate cottages.

'So you still serve the Duke of York, Master John?' he said,

severely. ‘In spite of your honour’s high place in the army of his Grace of Monmouth?’

‘Is that what my father tells you?’ John asked. ‘Well, I suppose I do still call his Highness patron.’

‘Papist though he be?’ asked Trubb, with even more severity. ‘And with a new Papist wife from Italy? I wonder you be not ashamed to acknowledge it!’

‘Why? The Duke of Monmouth is my superior officer and he is no Papist.’

‘No, indeed. God bless him!’ the old man said vigorously. ‘The neighbours here would have the King acknowledge him as heir.’

‘Be careful how you speak,’ John warned. ‘In London such talk spoke so freely could be counted treason fit for the gallows.’

Trubb laughed at such a piece of nonsense, but John rode back to Whitehall in a state of confused anxiety.

And so he should be, in common with most thinking men and particularly all those in any way concerned with public affairs and events. The matter of the succession was keeping the whole country divided, for with it went the great question of the position and power of the Crown. In Parliament the Earl of Shaftesbury was attempting to bring forward a law to limit the Royal power. Charles had nicknamed him ‘Little Sincerity’ for his short stature and his ability to change his views to suit his own ambitions. He had formed the foundation of the great Whig party of reform which was to grow mightily in the future. But at this time Charles’s only recourse was to prorogue or even dissolve the House of Commons. Those spreading cries ‘No Popery!’ ‘Down with the French!’ spelled ruin unless he could counteract them. Even the Earl of Danby, formerly Sir Thomas Osborne, a highly successful Treasurer, could not solve this problem, which was very far from being mathematical.

It was not enough that Charles dismissed his brother from the post of Lord High Admiral. That he sent him to Scotland to ease the Court and the Navy and the citizens of London of his unwelcome presence. His new Duchess, the Italian Papist, remained and though her first two babies by the Duke died in infancy, following the unhappy rule of the times and particularly of the Stuart dynasty, still she was with her husband, she was young, there would be more little Catholics brought into the world, each boy among them a threat to the Throne.

With the Duke's going, Churchill waited unhappily for further employment. The wars abroad had died down for the moment, though they were not over, for King Louis's appetite for conquest was by no means satisfied. In one more campaign John Churchill served under Turenne, again distinguishing himself. But now the great Marshall was dead and this, more than any political move, any religious scruple, broke John's allegiance to France. Moreover, as he had explained to Will Hayden, he knew that Charles was being pressed to remove all Englishmen from the French armies, while at the same time that traditional English force in the service of the Prince of Orange was being encouraged, if not enlarged.

'Now that his Grace is made Captain-General of the King's Army and is become so favoured for his Anglican belief, I trust we shall not be ordered away to Holland,' Churchill grumbled, as he and Godolphin rode in the King's train to the races at Newmarket.

'It is possible' Sidney answered in a low voice, for the Prince of Orange was daily expected to arrive at Harwich upon a state visit to his uncle.

Seeing his friend's gloomy looks Godolphin went on, 'I think his real object is to discuss a possible marriage with the Princess Mary.'

John exclaimed in horror. 'Marriage! The Princess is a mere child!'

'A growing, healthy child. Soon to be fifteen. Not so unusual. A contract for the alliance would be a greatly soothing event throughout the realm. The Princess is still next in line after her father.'

'She may have a brother.'

'All things are possible. Is not the Prince Rupert also in the line of succession?'

'God forbid!'

'Amen to that.'

So speculations and hopes grew and sank again when the Prince of Orange went home with no announcement made of any plans he might have, leaving Churchill and many other eager young officers still unemployed and uncertain of their future.

Not that they were unoccupied. Or at least those who

frequented the King's Court, where the pursuit of pleasure never slackened, where money flowed all too freely at the tables, where plays and masques and balls continued to bring patronage to the arts and delight to the sovereign. Where Louise de Kéroualle, now Duchess of Portsmouth, reigned as chief favourite, transmitting her master's secrets to her French lord through the latter's ambassador. That her news was only-such as Charles considered negligible mattered little to either. He was as fond of her as his nature allowed and even had a warship built and named 'Fubbs' which was his pet name for her and really most appropriate.

So young Churchill's life, though aimless for the time being, was far from dull and before long brought a particular occasion that was to set him upon a course he was never to forsake. But before this event he was taken into Sidney Godolphin's confidence in a way that surprised him.

John had remarked upon Sidney's preoccupation in all their recent discussions, his lack of the accustomed grasp of a situation, the wise comment on it.

Sidney said, 'It should be no surprise to you. You of all people should recognise my symptoms and allow for them.'

John stared at him. 'You are telling me you are in love?'

'And why not? I am older than you, but not yet senile.'

'Barely thirty. No, Sidney. I am only astonished you have said nothing before. I have heard nothing.'

'Hitherto I had cause to be secret. Now I would have you know I would marry Miss Blagge. Margaret Blagge. My lovely Meg. So faithful to her poor Mistress up to the day of her Highness's death.'

John murmured his agreement, his congratulations. Of course he recognised the name. A fellow maid of honour of Arabella's at the beginning of her service with the Duchess of York. He had always refrained from echoing the coarser interpretations of the fair one's marked friendship with Mr. John Evelyn. He had never listened to them, preferring to believe that this lady from goodness and piety as well as Frances Jennings from prudence and self-interest, had repelled all dishonourable advances.

'My suit will be widely known,' Godolphin said, with an unexpected note of pleading in his voice.

'You will have my heartfelt support,' his friend told him.

Perhaps this knowledge of Godolphin's state accounted in part for John's subsequent behaviour. The occasion of it was a state ball to which Sidney was able to find an invitation for Captain Churchill. Sidney almost at once saw Margaret Blagge standing with some of her friends. He drew John's attention to her, whereupon the latter exclaimed, 'I leave you then, Sidney. I have seen the beauty I rescued when she had disguised herself as an orange girl and—'

'That old tale! Miss Frances Jennings! Yes, I see her too, with Miss Hamilton and that simpering French Count, de Grammont, they call him, a prime gossip—'

But John was gone, weaving his way through the crowd, bent upon renewing his acquaintance with the sometime maid of honour to the late Duchess of York and now in the employ of her successor, Mary Beatrice of Modena.

Miss Jennings recognised him, inwardly admiring the splendid appearance he presented, even more handsome than before in face and figure, with the assured manners and self-confidence the years of military success in the company of the great had bestowed upon him.

She accepted his bow of recognition and introduced him to her friends, the Count de Grammont, Sir George Hamilton his younger brother, Anthony Hamilton, their sister Miss Hamilton. The latter had been staying in the country and had come to London with a country couple, a Mrs. Wetenhall and her husband. The visiting lady was in a state of great excitement.

'As you see, sir,' Miss Jennings whispered to John. 'Madam is expecting very shortly. I am sure she should not have graced this occasion, for she hath declared she will dance at it.'

John nodded, attempting a seriousness he did not feel. But at that moment Miss Hamilton joined them, whispering something to Miss Jennings that John did not catch. So he turned away to find yet another member of the group he had not been presented to. This was a younger version of the Frances Jennings he had just left. A younger, brighter, more beautiful, far more beautiful, more attractive

'Allow me,' Count de Grammont was at his elbow, sharp eyes flickering from one to the other. 'Miss Sarah Jennings, may I present the Captain Churchill, at your service—'

'Madam,' John said, hiding his unexpected, total confusion in

a very deep bow. ‘I am acquainted with Miss Frances, your sister, I believe. I did not realise you were with her until this moment.’

‘I am not truly with her,’ Sarah told him at once, her eyes sparkling. ‘We do both serve her Highness, the Princess Mary Beatrice, but I am maid of honour to the Princess Anne.’

John looked about him but did not see the two young daughters of the Duke of York. However his interest was not with them, but with the girl beside him. He had freed Godolphin to pursue his intended. He now felt grateful to his friend for this unlooked for opportunity. He recognised his inward excitement, his sudden joy, his swift leaping hope, for what they truly were. Love, that jaded, mis-used word. Love all embracing, body mind and spirit, no mere lust. His certainty made him draw in a quick breath, so that Miss Jennings asked, ‘Do you find my explanation strange, sir? I swear to you it is a true one.’

‘Strange? Why no, madam. I am not so ill-mannered I would dispute any explanation put forward by a lady.’

‘You protest very strongly, sir. I do assure you. I was a child when I first came to Court. I played with the Princess Anne, a younger child than myself.’

‘Indeed you mistake me. I feared your displeasure. I would not for the world displease you.’

Taking a firm grip on himself, John bowed to her deeply and turned away. His mind and heart were so confused by Miss Jennings’s forceful personality and his immediate response to it that he hardly knew where he was until Sir George Hamilton caught him by the sleeve as he was marching forward on to the dance floor.

John laughed, apologised and stood back. Sir George said, ‘You have met my sister. I think. She that so ill-advisedly hath brought the woman Wetenhall hither. And now cannot persuade the baggage to sit down and rest.’

Miss Hamilton had come up on John’s other side. ‘I have done my best!’ she cried. ‘George will not help me. It hath all gone to Mistress Wetenhall’s head and she more than eight months gone. She swears she *will* not, *need* not rest. If you knew—’

She blushed deeply and moved away.

‘What more could I know that gives your sister such embarrassment?’ John asked.

The Count Hamilton, as he sometimes called himself, laughed loudly. ‘The country cousin herself confided in me what my sister was ashamed to tell you, a stranger,’ he said smiling. ‘She carries the child very much to one side, which makes any gown look ill-shapen. So she had a cushion strapped to the opposite side of her belly to render the whole symmetrical.’

‘While seeming to promise twins at least,’ John said, smiling in his turn.

The King and Queen came in with their attendants. John stayed where he was with the group about the Hamiltons and the Jennings sisters.

The royal pair danced, then sat in raised dignity to watch. When presently the Queen retired with her ladies, the King was joined by the Duchess of Portsmouth, who had arrived with the Duke of Buckingham and Lord Arlington. By now the formal dances had been followed by more lively measures, country dances in the round and jigs in long lines.

It was in one of the latter that Miss Hamilton’s long-felt fears were realised. Turning, twisting, jumping, swinging, Mrs. Wetenhall’s cushion broke from its fastening and even as she cried out in fear and confusion the bundle fell upon the floor with a small thud heard only by those directly in its path, who leaped aside.

While most of the company stood still in amazement and the musicians checked their playing, the Duke of Buckingham acted. Dashing forward he snatched the cushion from the floor, pulled off his sash to swaddle it, cradled it in his arms and proceeded to move about the ballroom, making mewing sounds like a new-born babe and calling ‘Nurse! Nurse!’ at intervals in a loud voice.

The whole room exploded in laughter. Even the King grinned widely before putting an end to the farce by rising to retire. As for poor Mrs. Wetenhall, her vexation and her deep humiliation nearly brought on a total collapse before she was hurried away by her friends, weeping and moaning and begging that no one would tell her husband what had happened.

In the general confusion John found himself left alone until he saw the two Jennings sisters, speaking in furious undertones near the door through which the Hamilton party had just disappeared.

At once he stepped forward to offer his services.

‘My sister must find her governess, the Lady Francis Villiers,’ Frances said eagerly. ‘You come to our rescue, sir, as before. I myself am expected to join Miss Hamilton.’

She hesitated, looking at Sarah, who said gaily, ‘Go sister. Captain Churchill will help me find my way.’

But before she could take the arm he bent towards her a sharp voice checked them.

‘Miss Jennings! I have been searching high and low for you!’

‘And have now found her,’ John said, retreating to make his bow. ‘I therefore take my leave, my lady. Your servant, Miss Sarah.’

She curtseyed low, her lips smiled, her eyes were warm.

John went home to bed without trying to find Godolphin. Tomorrow would be time enough to tell his friend he too had discovered his future.

Chapter Twelve

Though The Prince of Orange had paid his visit to England and gone home again with no obvious agreement either of a military or a matrimonial kind, some progress had been made secretly. Neither the experienced King nor his cautious nephew had been willing to commit themselves beyond this veiled understanding. Charles could not give up altogether his usual source of income, France. Prince William could not lay aside his long-standing distrust of his uncles.

Meanwhile the two Princesses, Mary and Anne, continued to live at Richmond in comfortable, if dull, seclusion. Charles knew that in his endless fight with his parliament they were his most valuable, perhaps his only truly valuable asset. He had ordered that they should be brought up in the Anglican faith, and shown to exercise it in public worship. And that their youth and inexperience should be safe from any kind of exploitation. While their mother was still alive they had appeared rarely at Whitehall and then only upon the formal appearances of the Royal family. It was now very necessary to safeguard them from the influence of a Catholic stepmother.

The Duke of York's new Duchess was herself a very young woman who in spite of her piety was no bigot. She did not hold it against the two children that their religion, ordered for them by a cynical king to support his shaky throne, made them innocent servants of Satan. She pitied them for it. Besides, they were proof to her that not all her husband's progeny failed to survive their infancy. She took heart from this knowledge even as her own poor babes continued to sicken and die.

So while the little princesses flourished in the shelter of their pleasant home at Richmond, and Charles continued to make secret bargains with his cousin Louis in France, at the same time quietly but steadfastly opposing Lord Shaftesbury in public, John Churchill made his first careful moves in the siege of Sarah Jenning's heart.

Perhaps at first he had no thought of marriage. He was in love again, more fully, more ardently, than ever before. He made no

attempt to disguise his feelings. Even in his early letters to her he declared his love. Though she gave him no encouragement, he continued to declare it, in warmer terms with each week and month that passed. His only hope, as time went on, lay in the fact that she continued to answer, accepting his devotion, sometimes scolding, but never forbidding him to continue.

Lady Francis Villiers had suspected Captain Churchill's interest from the night of the ball. She found an occasion to warn Miss Jennings.

'You have received an almost indecent number of letters and all by the same messenger of the Duchess herself,' she said. 'I believe they do not come from her Highness.'

'You believe truly, my lady,' Sarah answered.

Her voice was not raised, it was lady-like but firm. Too firm, thought Lady Villiers indignantly, for a chit of her age, speaking to one more than twice her age and an earl's daughter, too.

'Then may I know with whom you are in such constant communication?'

'Why certainly, my lady. It is Captain Churchill, of the King's Guards, a friend of my sister, Frances. I think you have met Captain Churchill, my lady.'

Lady Villiers had a sharp answer on her tongue, but held it back, for the Princess Anne had run up to them saying, 'Sarah, Sarah, you must come with me into the garden. There is something I must show you. Come! Come at once!'

'Your Highness!' Sarah answered, taking the hand the child held out to her. 'I may go, my lady?' she called out laughing, as Anne dragged her away.

Lady Villiers could not refuse. She had nothing to complain of, in fact nothing to refuse. She knew that Miss Jennings had played with the Duke's younger daughter since the latter was only eight years old. Now the Princess Anne was twelve, a happy child, fond-of her sister Mary, fond of her young step-mother, the new Duchess, fondest of all of this playmate, Jennings, who was, who must be, no longer a rather older child, but a young woman, inspiring the love of a grown man, or at any rate receiving his frequent tributes.

If she had demanded to know what was in the latest letter, would Sarah have let her read it? Very likely. The girl had no modesty. But what next? Lady Villiers had great misgivings.

These were fulfilled, for Captain Churchill arrived at the house in Richmond less than a week later. He brought a written message from the Duke himself to the Princess Mary, with another, at greater length, for the governess of the maids. Since the young man was under the patronage of the Duke there could be no hint of intrigue in his being employed upon this errand.

All the same was it really part of his employment, having delivered the letters, to ask permission to speak with Miss Sarah Jennings? Was she herself correct, bending to the authority in his voice and presence, to yield to this request?

Lady Villiers was astonished at her own behaviour as she sent for the girl and more than ever doubtful of her own wisdom as she stood outside upon the terrace watching the pair walk away across the wide lawn to disappear behind the trimmed yew hedge of the rose garden. With the utmost propriety in his bearing and speech, she acknowledged. And in hers too, the minx.

'You have made a remarkable conquest there, sir,' Sarah told her would-be lover. 'We tremble in her presence as a rule and take all her chidings in silence.'

'You have never trembled in anyone's presence,' John told her. 'It is we who tremble in yours, for fear of offending you.'

They both laughed, understanding one another's minds and rejoicing in it. They talked about the affairs of Royalty, the doubtful prospects of the Dutch marriage for the Princess Mary; they talked about the Duke's growing unpopularity on account of his religion and the open public hatred of the French and of all Papists.

'So you would have it your future employment and mine are in immediate hazard?' Sarah asked, with a defiant note in her voice.

'I greatly fear it. Though I am not actually employed by the Duke. He is graciously pleased to use my services from time to time in memory of my old position in his Household. But my true master is the King with his Grace of Monmouth in overall command of the whole standing army. I do but serve in one of the Guards regiments.'

'But the King's own. Am I not right?'

She spoke proudly, looking up at him with such admiring bright eyes he had difficulty in not putting his arms round her to

take an added reward from her lips.

But he did restrain himself, though they were alone among the roses, out of sight of the house and Lady Villiers, warmed by the sun, fanned by a gentle breeze from the river in the valley below. He longed to tell her all those words of love he continually wrote to her, but she was not ready for such close impact. He feared instant anger, sharp ridicule worse than anger. So he said nothing and they moved on aimlessly, until, beginning to despair of any further advance upon this occasion, he heard Sarah say, 'My sister Frances is to marry Sir George Hamilton. I believe she hath loved him along while but allowed him to think her mind was set upon others in order to bring him forward.'

John's heart leaped at these words. That meant Sarah's mind was upon marriage too. Surely this was a direct hint to him that she would follow her sister's example in the conduct of her own affair? He replied at once, very seriously, 'Miss Jennings is a great beauty. She must have inspired many pursuits, many offers.'

'She has indeed. But by no means all honourable. Even his Highness in early days'

She broke off, abashed for once by the instant hardening of that mouth she so adored in her heart, remembering too late his sister's notoriety.

'Miss Frances will marry Sir George then? Will she go with him to live in France? He calls himself Count, doth he not? Friend of de Grammont, the gossip?'

'It is possible, I suppose.'

She still felt confused by her mistake, though her glimpse of the fiercer side of his nature only excited her greater admiration and further pleasure in his company.

But alas, he was bringing this delightful visit to a close. Already he had guided their steps, politely but firmly, into a path of return to the terrace. Perhaps he would not come again. Perhaps those cherished letters would stop, unless she broke her promise to herself never to encourage his suit until he spoke of marriage as well as love. But that she would never do. For both their sakes, she pleaded with herself. For both.

Lady Villiers was not on the terrace when they reached it. John refused an invitation to re-enter the house for refreshment.

His horse must be rested and watered by now, he said. And as for himself, what further refreshment could he need after this precious hour in her company?

The gallantry rang false. It brought bitter tears to Sarah's heart if not to her eyes. His own were blank and cold as he looked down into her face on leaving. He brought her hand up to his mouth and though his lips trembled a little, the touch was slight and quite impersonal. Lady Villiers, who appeared on the terrace at exactly the right moment to receive his thanks for her welcome, noticed Sarah's unusual silence and subdued behaviour. This continued for three days after the visit, until the letters began to appear again and the girl's spirits regained their former excessive exuberance.

John Churchill found he could not live without some hope of succeeding in his pursuit of Miss Jennings. He said as much to Sidney Godolphin, but only got back some useless though sympathetic advice.

'Do as I have done, John,' his friend told him. 'My torments are nearly over. Margaret loves me at last and our families begin to look kindly upon our union.'

'Union?' John was astonished.

'Quietly! You must not take it ill that I have not given you the news before. I dared not. I must wait for final approval from the King and his Majesty is beset with so many cares—'

John put an affectionate arm about his friend's shoulders. He had always half expected Sidney's prolonged love affair to come to grief, not suddenly or tragically, but just by fading into a slow, dignified death from a famine of passion on both sides. The lady was not old. but she was no girl, being over twenty years of age. Sidney was near thirty. Moreover Miss Blagge's friendship with the scholar, writer and thinker, John Evelyn, had never slackened.

'It is none of his Majesty's business,' he said, briskly, 'And you must see to it that it does not become any of Mr. Evelyn's business, either.'

Sidney was outraged. He pulled away from his friend.

'You dare to suggest—'

'I do not. Indeed I suggest nothing that would hurt or insult such gentle souls—'

All three, he nearly said, but caught back the words. Gentle

pious souls! Gentle pious fools! He thought of Sarah. No gentle pious object there, but a strong fortress, a steely defence, a challenge to all his military skill of planned stratagem, ardent attack, unbreakable courage.

'You will succeed by your patience, which I see is limitless,' he told his friend. 'Moreover I do understand from your example that my own purpose must be no less than marriage. I think Sarah hath known this from the start. She as much as told me so in speaking of her sister.'

Godolphin nodded. All the world, by which he meant the Court, had seen how matters lay with Captain Churchill. They were amused by Sarah Jennings's behaviour, but they laid their odds on her rather than the warrior.

John went to his father. His circumstances were hardly favourable for marriage plans, which he knew well already. But Sir Winston forestalled his son's confession with one of his own.

'I have been meaning to disclose my unhappy position to you before, my son.' Sir Winston said. 'The fact is I am in debt and can see no way to discharge it. I can no longer afford to live in this house, in this extravagant manner.'

'But your office?'

'My office does bring me a certain pattance, but it is all eaten up by the position I am forced to maintain, by my goings to and from my office in Whitehall, by the state your mother feels is due to her, which she never hankered after all the time we suffered at Ashe.'

'It is very natural,' John answered. He had enjoyed the sight of his mother at Court, enjoying herself, finding his sisters suitable husbands among the gentry attending there. 'Would you go back into the country?' he asked, puzzled by his father's bitterness.

'Leaving my debts unpaid?'

'Wootton is in fine shape, as I saw recently, when I visited there.'

'I know. Trubb sent me word of it. But, my son, Wootton is entailed upon yourself. I cannot touch it.'

This was a problem indeed, with no immediate solution in view. At any rate, John decided, he would not add to his father's burden by disclosing his own wish to marry Sarah Jennings. If she had been a great fortune with guardians to be persuaded, or

a young widow of means, able to dispose of herself as she wished, then his father's consent could be taken for granted and thankfully. As it was he laid aside his own ambition out of a strong family loyalty.

'My dear father,' he said feelingly, 'do you think I am so ungrateful for your constant care and goodness to me that I am not ready to repay what I can when it is needed. Let me renounce all my right in Wootton Glanville. Let you rid yourself of your present burden and perhaps find another, smaller estate, still in our native county, where you and my mother can live in comfort without anxiety.'

Sir Winston wept for relief and gratitude. Lady Churchill wept, more in sorrow for the end of magnificance than for anything else. King Charles, who had kept himself informed of all the Churchill family's activities, was graciously pleased to accept Sir Winston's offer to resign his post for reasons of health and increasing age. But he persuaded the old man to keep it even if he did not live in London, but only attend at his office from time to time. Sir Winston was no longer a member of Parliament. His seat for Weymouth had been taken by a younger man in the second election of Charles's reign.

With John's help the Churchills found a small property at Mintern in Somerset to which they moved in the following year.

So Captain Churchill continued to write ardent letters to his love and she continued to answer them infrequently, coldly, but still so persistently that his occasional anger, when he vowed to burn her image from his mind forever, was forever drenched by her patient, mildly protesting replies.

In May of that year Godolphin confessed to his friend that he was at last, but secretly, married to Margaret Blagge. He was still acting as a groom of the bedchamber to the King and hoped to be promoted to Master of the Robes, when he might proclaim his marriage. Meanwhile Margaret would stay with their mutual friends, Lord and Lady Berkeley, who were going to live for a while in Paris.

This singularly unromantic tale had no effect upon John whatever, certainly no effect upon the friendship of the two, since they could continue to meet as and when they chose. If John thought Sidney had gained very little from marrying in this fashion, he certainly did not envy him. When, and he no longer

said ‘if’ to himself, he married Sarah, it would not be in secret, though there might be little display over the ceremony. And they would be together always, except of course when he was soldiering. He groaned in his frustration as he thought of that confusion of wars in Europe in which he could find no way to take part.

During the whole of the following year Charles and his Court continued in their usual reckless ways. A new fashion began of river games, rowing and swimming in the reaches about Richmond, Isleworth and Teddington, where the water was less fouled than lower down at Hampton and Westminster. Sometimes musicians played and sang from boats on the water to parties on barges. Sometimes a display of fireworks attracted mobs to the banks to watch.

These light-hearted pranks fed the sharp criticism of many writers, but Charles, who understood it, could only wait. He knew what the writers wanted, what Shaftesbury, his enemy in Parliament, wanted. He knew that the popular feeling against the Catholics was near to explosion, but still he waited.

Then in the following year, 1677, events moved at last. Louis of France struck again. Prince William of Orange suffered some reverses. In his distress he found his naturel allies in the United Provinces less enthusiastic than he had hoped. So once again he turned to his uncle in England. A fresh alliance there might strengthen his hand. Holland would never submit to France; they could always flood their land as they had done before when directly attacked. But that long-lasting ruin must be avoided by all possible means.

His Uncle Charles was ready with the means – the hand in marriage of Prince William’s cousin, the Princess Mary Stuart, now aged sixteen. The promise of alliance, if not its signed and sealed fact. This did not arrive and William, knowing Charles’s long dependence upon France, scarcely expected it. But William himself arrived to claim his bride and was married to her in November and took her back to the Hague with him a few days later, together with a train of ladies and gentlemen, befitting a Princess who was second in line of succession to the throne of England.

The people were delighted. Never since the Prince’s mother had married his father, the former Prince of Orange, had a royal

marriage been in any way truly popular. The Portugese Queen, the Italian Duchess of York, Papist born, had not been welcome. True, the young Prince was a Calvinist, but they were prepared to tolerate that sect. They rejoiced. Charles, watching, felt his burden lift a little.

When Princess Mary was told her fate, she cried for a whole day. She had met William on his first visit and had not liked him. He was not tall, he was not handsome. He was lean, with a long thin face and a severe expression. He had been a sickly child, mastering his early bouts of illness with difficulty. This suggested weakness in later years rather than the strength his survival had in fact bestowed on him. To a girl, barely sixteen, he was most unattractive. Her tears were very natural. But in the end she submitted with dignity.

The Princess Anne found the whole event confusing, terrifying, a disaster. She clung to her sister whom she loved, and could with difficulty be parted from her. She then clung to Sarah Jennings whom she loved still more than she did the Princess Mary. For this reason Sarah remained at Richmond after the marriage. Her service to the Princess Anne had become a fixture for life.

Chapter Thirteen

The Marriage of the Princess Mary did nothing to resolve the confusion in England over the succession, for in November of the same year the Duchess of York gave birth to a son, a new small Duke of Cambridge. This still further inflamed the Commons against the Duke and brought on an even fiercer demand for his exclusion from the throne together with that of his son who would undoubtedly be brought up in the Catholic faith.

James, still in Scotland, demanded permission to return to England. He sent Churchill with a message to the King to demand what he called this just right. John had followed his former Master to the northern Kingdom in the hope of scraping some small employment. He was now eager to succeed in his mission, but he saw at once on arrival in London that it was hopeless. Charles dared not allow his obstinate, bigoted brother to show himself again in the capital. In fact the King's attitude had hardened. Even Scotland was not far enough. He recommended exile abroad.

While the deliberations were going on, with James in London, where he had of necessity been allowed to return very quietly for discussion, Captain Churchill managed to visit both his parents at Mintern and his beloved Sarah at Richmond. Though Sir Winston was aghast at his son's extraordinary wish to marry when the family fortunes were so low and the proposed bride had no fortune at all, he did still believe in John's great military gift. He still looked to a bright, if not wonderful future for him, perhaps not in the present King's reign, then when the Duke of York succeeded and was in a position to restore the throne to its former glory with the help of a loyal, trained, standing army.

The old cavalier put these out-dated arguments to his son, at the same time giving no stronger word against the marriage than lack of suitable means.

So Miss Jennings had won her case. When her faithful lover made his final plea, including the offer of marriage, she was all tenderness, all yielding, no hint of the triumph and self-

congratulation she allowed herself in secret. She welcomed John at Richmond with a modest eagerness he knew well how to reward. In all his long courtship he had never yet held her in his arms. His outpourings of love had been all on paper, Now for the first time he could allow his arms and lips to explain his love without words.

Lady Villiers had allowed them to meet alone in her own small parlour on the first floor of the house.

'Perhaps I should not admit you at all, captain,' she said when he was brought to her and she had sent for Sarah. 'You will know that the Princess Anne hath been ill, for three days very ill indeed. We feared smallpox, sir.'

'Smallpox!' John was horrified, thinking only of the danger to his beloved.

'A rash of spots, very similar. A fever, a congestion. But lasting merely five days. She mends hourly, without pustules appearing. The physician bled her only once.'

'God be praised!' John said, with heartfelt fervour.

Lady Villiers fully understood him and admired him for it. When Sarah appeared, subdued, blushing and altogether a gentler, more human creature than she often seemed in her bossy moments, Lady Villiers threw caution to the winds, laid aside her automatic fear of a seduction and left the young couple to enjoy their first meeting for several months.

They were married later that year and went for a time to Mintern where the elder Churchills were now spending most of their time.

And now John's fortunes took a notable upward bound. The King's unceasing efforts for peace in Europe while preserving England's neutrality, had at last shown signs of success. France understood that she had reached the limit of her phenomenal success; she saw the end of a conquest that would, if pursued, be self-destroying.

John Churchill, promoted to Colonel in a new-formed Admiral's regiment of Guards, was sent to Holland to advise on the military side of the proposed Peace of Nymegen. Sidney Godolphin was sent at the same time to prepare the political approach to the Treaty.

The two young men had never been so close in spite of the fact that both were recently married. Their wives were

comfortably placed meanwhile. Sarah continued to live at Mintern. Her own mother was still living, but she had quarrelled with her so fiercely that they had both decided they could never meet again, far less exist in the same house. At Mintern Sarah was proving herself a model daughter-in-law, and now that John had been promoted and given a most important and valuable commission in Holland, his future had suddenly leapt from one of real poverty to great and immediate promise.

The meetings to begin negotiations with France took place at the Hague. It was the first time John had met the Prince of Orange, except as part of a host of onlookers at his few public appearances in London. They were the same age and though Prince William was no warrior he was a very keen strategist and student of arms. He demanded that Colonel Churchill be brought to him alone. He dispensed with all ceremony and used an informal manner of speech.

'I have, as you are well aware, been at war for my life and the life of my country,' he began, seating himself at a table where a pile of maps lay to hand. 'Pray be seated, colonel. There is much we have to discuss.'

When John had taken the chair on the opposite side of the table the Prince went on. 'I have lost battles, in which you, for France—'

'For Turenne!' John could not help interrupting, before murmuring an apology.

William's eyes had gleamed angrily at this impertinence, but after a few seconds he smiled.

'I forgive you. The Marshal was a great soldier. More over you were not there at the time of my worst peril. Now, the position is this. I have lost that little province of Orange, which doth not grieve me, for it lies in southern France and will never be of value to me again. Here, let me show you—'

He leaned forward to unroll the topmost map, twisting it towards Churchill and pointing.

'Here, you see, is Orange marked, and here Lorraine, given openly to the Duke but under the control of Louis and likely to be mentioned in any Treaty we sign. Here, the former Spanish Netherlands.'

John swung the map round towards the Prince, pinning down its edges with various weighty objects he found on the table. He

jumped to his feet and moved quickly round the table to stand just behind the Prince.

For an instant the latter shrank into himself, an instinctive action proclaiming his dangerous, uncertain childhood and youth. John understood it and pitied him. He remembered that William's widowed mother had died while he was still a child.

But it was over at once. The Prince did nothing. His hand had reached for a short dagger he wore at his waist, but fell away again. His mouth had opened, but he did not shout for his guards, whom he had sent from the room. He sat still, alert, waiting.

'Your Highness,' John said warmly, with admiration in his voice. 'If your Highness will allow me to explain.'

He began to point about the map with his forefinger, describing the whole progress of the French King's campaigns, the various attacks upon open ground and citadel, the advances and retreats, the composition of the troops.

'And your own exploits? William asked drily. He pulled out his short knife and offered it to John.

'Show me the siege of Maastricht,' he said. 'And how you won it in a personal action. Instruct me, Colonel Churchill.'

John took the jewelled handle. Using the knife as a pointer he described in detail, upon a larger map William pulled from the pile for him, the exact sequence of events that had led to the surrender of that great fort. He did not leave out his own part entirely, but he added it in such a way that it did not stand out as an act of heroism or reckless bravery or any other individual action. He might not himself, his personal self, have been there at all.

'Excellent!' Prince William said softly at the end, gently clapping his hands. 'Clear as a rockpool in the mountains on our side of the Rhine.'

His voice changed.

'We have no mountains in Holland. No rock pools. Our stiff Dutch merchants do not want such things. Merely peace for their trade. They must have peace.'

'Your Highness,' Colonel Churchill said. He did not presume to take off the weights and roll up the map. He put down the Prince's dagger upon the centre of it. He felt that this interview was over.

He was right. Prince William nodded to him and clapped his hands. Two guards came instantly. John stepped back, bowing low.

'We will speak on these matters again,' William said. 'And soon.'

'Your Highness!' John repeated. He was pleased with the interview. He left it in a state of elation that was plain to Godolphin when he met him a few minutes later as they had previously arranged, in the former's lodging beside one of the many quays.

'I have found a friend,' John said enthusiastically. 'A military mind to match me at every turn. His Highness hath not had sufficient opportunity till now, and no sufficient practice, to his great disadvantage, in actually bearing any arms. But he will be a leader to follow, I dare swear it!'

'A leader! *Will* be!'

Godolphin was shocked. He added, purposefully damping the enthusiasm, 'I thought you were attached to the Duke, had always been so. At least to the King!'

John stared. He began to realise the enormity of what he had said. Finally he muttered, 'His Highness is set upon a treaty. So, are they not, are our Masters?'

'That is how I understand it,' agreed Sidney, calmly.

And that was how it was settled, with some advantage to France or Louis would not have signed the Treaty. But with Holland saved and the United Provinces relieved from the burden of continuing war and the fear of invading devastation. And with England less than heroic but in affect neutral, as Charles had all along intended.

England, seeing the Prince of Orange supported, was pleased and would even have become more tolerant of the Duke of York but for the emergence of a criminal whose astonishing success exploded all the anti-Catholic feeling that had been simmering for so long.

This train of events, however, was slow to start, though appallingly hard to bring to an end. The two friends were not aware of anything amiss when they travelled back from the Hague. They were praised for their endeavours, they were thanked and rewarded. John was re-united with his Sarah, and they went back to London to his former rooms in Jermyn Street

for he could not long to be parted from his patron, Sidney was re-united with his Margaret, who was very near her time. She had been staying in Paris with her friends, the Berkeleys, but was now at home again.

And then tragedy, unexpected, inexorable. Mrs. Godolphin was delivered of a healthy son whom they named Francis. A few days later she developed a fever; in ten days she was dead.

It was a shock from which Sidney never recovered. His courtship and marriage had been unspectacular, but his love was genuine. He did not blame himself for the disaster as a young man of the romantic age two hundred years later might have done. Illness and death had haunted all the ways of nature, uncontrolled at that time by any real medical knowledge and hindred rather than helped by ancient ways and superstitions. God willed the sorrows of life for a Divine Purpose. Sidney Godolphin and Margaret, she even more fervently than her husband, accepted God's will and prayed for understanding even as she sank to her death. Mr. Evelyn too, deeply grieved, could only sorrow for the untimely removal of a saint. The baby survived and flourished.

While Godolphin and his friends were absorbed in their grief, and Charles was enjoying a short-lived approval on the part of his difficult parliament, an incident occurred that should have warned him of the violence about to erupt on the land.

The King was walking with his favourite spaniels in St. James's Park one morning when a man came up to the group of gentlemen attending him and tried to push through to speak urgently with his Majesty.

He was restrained. Charles glanced at him, motioned to others to question him and passed on. But later he asked what the fellow had wanted.

'A madman perhaps, sir,' he was told.

'But what did he want? What did he say?'

'To warn your Majesty of a plot. Some garbled nonsense—'

Charles looked keenly at the speaker. 'You seem unimpressed. What kind of plot? Against the State? Against our person? Of no consequence?'

The gentleman grew red in the face; trying to pretend the matter was trivial he had botched his account of it. Now his confusion rendered him speechless. A lord in waiting took over

the affair, to mend it if possible.

'The fellow seemed much in earnest, sir,' he said. 'So we passed him to the guards, who have taken him for questioning. If it be not the raving of a lunatic, it will be gone into.'

'This so-called plot, you would say?' Charles hesitated. 'Against our person, we see by your looks, our lords and gentlemen! Well, bring us news of it when the wretch hath been wrung dry.'

The King continued his walk. The man was held, declared all he had been told to say and was finally discharged, for he had himself attempted nothing and had been unarmed. He was not even punished for his impertinence in approaching the King. Quiet inquiries continued to be made.

Behind this action the promoters met to discuss their plans. The master mind was a certain Ezerel Tonge, a middle-aged, somewhat mentally unstable clergyman, very bigoted in religion, very anti-Papist in mind and feelings. He had, some years before launching the Plot, met a young man who exactly suited his chief need of a supporter and agent. This was Titus Oates, who though only twenty-seven at the time the two met, already had a long history of fraud, indecency, lies, perjury and slander. Oates was powerfully built, with a long chin and small, shifty eyes. He claimed to have a degree in theology, but this was not true. In fact his loud, confident voice never spoke the real truth in anything. His father, too, had been a liar and cheat; he had held a clerical post, but had been turned out of it.

Dr. Tonge had at first merely encouraged and supported Oates in worming his way into Catholic groups in order to discover their secrets. He even lied his way into Jesuit circles abroad for a time. When eventually the two conspirators felt they had enough garbled and perjured evidence to proclaim in public, they launched the Popish Plot.

They swore they had discovered a plan to assassinate the King and his chief ministers, put the country in the hands of the Papists by invasion and conquest, set a Catholic king on the throne and bring about the destruction of the Protestant Church in England.

The faked plot was sparked by a spectacular murder. A respected magistrate, Sir Edmund Godfrey, was discovered dead, his body pierced through by his own sword. It was found that

death was by strangling; the body must have been brought to the spot where it was found and then run through in ghastly emphasis.

No final explanation of the mystery was ever made, but many innocent lives were claimed by Titus Oates and his accomplices in perjury. For the whole country rose in anger, fear, outrage and cries for revenge upon the Catholics. Informers bred, like flies. No Catholic was safe, however unimportant, from personal enemies, even of his own religion. No Catholics of importance escaped, unless he fled the country.

The Duke of York had hoped that his daughter's marriage, together with the new Peace of Nymegen, would soften the Parliament party, the new-formed, so-called Whigs, under the Earl of Shaftesbury, but was disappointed. They seized the opportunity to bring another Act of Exclusion to prevent James's future accession or that of his baby son. To defeat this move Charles had to prorogue and finally dissolve the Parliament.

But he had to banish his brother from the country. Discussion, persuasion, gave place to orders. James, with his Duchess, and the two children, the Princess Isabella and the Duke of Cambridge, went to Brussels, where the Duke set up his exiled Court in less than luxurious state.

He had not his brother's way with their cousin of France. Louis had been willing in the past to employ him in his army, from time to time, since he was a very young man. But he was not inclined to give him the money he needed so sorely now.

In England Charles was obliged, following this move, to exclude all the five Catholic peers from the House of Lords and, chiefly for their own safety, house them in the Tower. He did not believe in the Plot; he had heard Oates give evidence and had been sickened by its obvious falseness. But the country in its madness of religious hysteria hailed the perjurer as a great saviour. He was given a pension, a large weekly sum that clothed and fed and housed him better than he had ever imagined possible. A titular degree was bestowed upon him, so that he went about in flowing robes. Unfortunately his former low life and bestial habits betrayed him in respectable company, especially when he was the worse for wine. His mentor, Dr. Tonge, had to rebuke him and try to arrange he would not disgrace himself too frequently in good society. But any little

incidents of this sort were soon forgotten in the surge and flow of the great waves of hatred, driven by fear, ignorance and intolerance, that swept into every corner of the land, every class of society, every community, every family.

They even crashed through the sheltered walls of Whitehall itself to eddy about the throne, where Charles sat, covering his near despair with the silent, watchful, cold courage that had never failed him yet and never would do the end of his strange troubled life.

Chapter Fourteen

In Brussels the Duke of York watched the turmoil across the water with anger and a sense of deep outrage. Each Catholic death on Tyburn or in the Tower was an insult to himself, he felt, quite as much as to the Pope and the God all Catholics worshipped. He thought little about the actual victims themselves nor how his arrogant flaunting of his religion had increased the public outburst. He watched, adding up his wrongs, brooding over the injustice of his position. He came to depend more and more upon his faithful followers and servants, among whom John Churchill and a distant cousin of John's, an army man, Colonel George Legge, were two of the most important.

'My love,' John told Sarah one day, 'the Duke demands I join him in Brussels. I would not leave you again so soon, could I see a way to prevent it.'

'Nor shall you, my dearest,' she answered, with sparkling eyes, getting up from her seat to put her arms about his neck. 'For I have a message and that from her Highness, who would have me travel with her to her father's Court.'

'The Princess Anne!' John was surprised. He doubted the news could be correct. 'Am I to understand the King hath granted permission for this?'

'That must be so, for her Highness is quite positive. Old Lady Villiers is to be in charge overall and I am to serve—'

John laughed. 'But not as maid of honour, for I claimed that maidenhead long since to your delight as well as mine, you wanton.'

She slapped his cheek, pretending anger. 'Rude soldier! You triumph too freely. No, not as maid but as lady in waiting or some such title. It bears a small salary which I shall keep to buy me a new gown to wear in Brussels.'

'If I choose you shall,' John warned her sternly.

She laughed, but she knew she must not go beyond a certain point in alluding to their poverty. It was true they were totally dependent upon any employment John might scrape from his

patron. His promotion had been a step forward and his recent reward substantial. But it would soon be spent and unless he found some fresh errand to perform for the Duke they would again be reduced to near penury, a state Colonel Churchill was determined they should not suffer however much his companions criticised what they called his ‘unholy love of money!’

During the journey to Brussels the Princess Anne told Sarah how she had managed to persuade her uncle to allow her to join her father and step-mother.

‘At first the King was quite against my journey,’ she explained.’ ‘He would have it the people would be fearful that I, a Protestant, would be corrupted into changing my religion. As if that were possible!’

‘I know your faith is very firm, your Highness,’ Sarah assured her.

‘Then the dangers of the voyage, the weather being so uncertain of late. My father’s ship was driven up and down the Channel for nine days before he reached harbour and that was only last month.’

‘Are you not afraid of the sea?’ Sarah asked, who had never yet ventured on to a ship.

‘I am in God’s hands,’ answered the Princess, avoiding the question. She added, ‘I would see those two children. Isabella grows into a lively pretty mite. The little Duke is sickly, I hear.’

Sarah sighed. ‘Alas for all royal babes,’ she said. She would have liked to add ‘except for those healthy bastards, both the King’s and his brother’s.’ But she knew she must not speak of them to her young mistress, who was only just fourteen and barely a woman.

Instead she repeated her question. ‘Then if the King opposed this visit, how did you in fact persuade him?’

‘It was not I,’ the girl answered. ‘It was in part his advisers, Mr. Godolphin among them, and in greater part the woman they call ‘Mrs. Carwell’.’

Sarah laughed. She wished the proud lady who was now the Duchess of Portsmouth, Louise de Kéroualle, Breton born, spy for Louis of France, chief mistress of King Charles, could hear herself so described. She controlled her mirth.

‘Perhaps,’ she answered, ‘her Grace of Portsmouth hath great

influence with the King. Moreover she is French. She may think it would be to your Highness's advantage to see more of the world.'

It was the Princess's turn to laugh. 'It is very much to my advantage to have you with me, Sarah,' she said. 'I grow tired of Richmond. Besides, my father promises me I shall go to Holland to see my sister. I have missed her sadly.'

Which was very true, Sarah thought, though she did not venture to speak further of it.

So to Brussels the Princess Anne proceeded in all safety and with no great delay either upon the sea or land. She did gain much from her reunion with her family and especially from the visit they all made to the Hague to see the Princess Mary and her husband.

The sisters were delighted to meet again. Mary was astonished to find her little companion of former days now grown to be as tall as herself, no longer speaking in a childish voice nor saying childish things but dignified, calm, sensible and as firm as ever in her religious beliefs and practice.

Early in the Churchills' establishment in Brussels John was sent off to Paris on a fresh mission for the Duke. It was clear that his position with James was as firm as ever and certainly more intimate. So Sarah's worst fears were proved unnecessary, though she was now pregnant for the first time and with poor Margaret Godolphin's sad fate still very much in her mind the separation from John distressed her greatly, though she knew she must keep her normal cheerfulness before the Princess.

It was a great relief and pleasure therefore when her sister, Frances, arrived at the Duke's Court. She was alone, for her husband, Count. Hamilton, had been killed, some time before, while fighting for France in Louis's recent, ill-judged campaign. She was still very beautiful and had overcome her early grief. In fact she already had begun to consider her former many admirers with a view to remarriage.

'They tell me I must not fret away my youth in perpetual widowhood,' she told Sarah, very seriously.

'Youth and beauty,' Sarah answered. 'You do not look a day older than when I last saw you and that was before the Count, God rest his soul, met his most untimely death.' She added, without a pause, 'Who told you you must re-marry? Was it,

perhaps, that mad Dick Talbot, so ardent in pursuit when you gave your heart to George Hamilton?'

Frances began to look angry but decided to laugh instead. 'And here was I thinking my young sister in her ignorance and seclusion with her dedicated soldier would have no knowledge of the world, the *great* world!'

'You mean the world of the great,' Sarah answered sharply. 'You forget that my soldier husband moves in that world as he hath from a boy and that he never forgets a rumour, nor fails to understand it.'

'Marry come up!' Frances said, putting on a face of disdain. 'Temper again! I marvel your John has not found a means to improve it. Nay, sister, we must not quarrel.'

They were sitting together on a hard-backed, carved seat. Frances leaned sideways to kiss Sarah's cheek and found to her surprise that it was wet with tears.

Their reconciliation was immediate, followed at once by Sarah's confession of her state and all her misgivings over it. Frances, who had no children of her own, nevertheless felt competent to give advice on the subject. But she soon came to an end of her second-hand knowledge and by returning to her own affairs and the renewed wooing of her old admirer, soon had Sarah laughing again at the antics and extravagances of men in love.

'Poor Dick!' Frances told her. 'He succeeds to that Irish earldom of Tyrconnel, but he may not find a way to enjoy it, for all this fury against Catholics, even Irish ones.'

She was right about the fury, for in England the informers, the perjurers and the slaughter of the innocents continued unabated. Even the Earl of Stafford, one of those lords committed to the Tower, largely for their own safety, was impeached for high treason upon the flimsiest of evidence. He was convicted and beheaded. Charles, who knew the old man was wholly innocent, dared not save him.

Meanwhile the popularity of the Duke of Monmouth grew, particularly in the west and north of the country. He was declared to be a fervent Protestant; he was known to be the King's son. If only he could be declared legitimate, the succession would no longer be a matter of dispute. So with the support of Shaftesbury's Whigs in both houses of Parliament,

rumours were put about that there had been a secret marriage between his parents, hitherto suppressed. Monmouth himself declared his belief in this. He came back from the Hague and even began to travel about the country, claiming his rights and finding ardent supporters wherever he went.

It was about this time that John Churchill had a letter from Hugh Offord, sent from Exeter, where his regiment was now serving to secure that barrier to the all-important ports on the Devon and Cornwall coasts, both north and south.

Hugh began by regretting his prolonged absence from the capital. 'It hath grieved me sorely,' he wrote, 'that I have had no sight or sound of you and my other friends at the Court. You will have heard, I doubt not, that Miss Firle was married three years hence to a country squire, a near neighbour of her family. It was a sad blow to me, though you know that I never had any high hopes of a happy outcome for my love. But God be praised consolation did reach me at length in the person of my dear wife, Anabel, third daughter of a ship-master of Bristol. His vessels trade with the New World colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut. Outlandish names, but conferring such good fortune that my family could raise no objection to our union. I already have two sons, healthy and thriving.'

'We have recently had a visit to our barracks of that late Commander-in-Chief of his Majesty's forces, who is looked upon with such great favour in these parts. I share their enthusiasm and remember your tales of his valour in battle abroad under the great Marshall Turenne—'

The letter ended with expressions of congratulation on John's marriage and upon his promotion in the King's army. He himself was now a captain, but looked no higher at present.

John felt some remorse for his neglect of his former friend and also some astonishment at his knowledge of events. But he remembered some fellow officers who had transferred themselves to the west to join the semi-private forces of certain of the great lords. Cromwell's type of organisation had inspired many changes in the method of recruitment and the ordering of the King's own forces, but feudal bodies of men still existed, recruited in the first place by those nobles and members of the gentry who had lost the King's battles in the Civil Wars. It would seem that Hugh must now belong to, or at any rate have contact

with, such forces.

In the next year Charles fell ill, and that so seriously that a message came to James in Brussels that it was advisable he should travel to his brother's side immediately.

Colonel Churchill was chosen to accompany the Duke. They set off at once. His Grace decided to disguise himself, for fear he should be recognised in England by hostile mobs. He wore an inferior suit of fustian, without decoration of any kind, and a plain sword. On his head a simple periwig, surmounted by a plain, black, wide-brimmed hat, without a feather but calculated to hide his features if he lowered his head. Churchill wore his uniform, making no alteration at all in it.

They crossed in reasonable time and rode straight to London at speed, leaving the Duke's servants to bring on the luggage in a hired coach.

They found Charles reclining in bed, pale, a little breathless, but clearly not in any immediate danger of dying.

He greeted them with a cynical smile and his usual friendly warmth.

'Your anxiety should have been relieved, brother,' he said, looking from one to the other of his visitors with less than the usual sparkle in his black eyes. 'But I know there are some who would promote it for their own ends. I think you are not of that crew, colonel,' he added, resting a keener look on John, who stood slightly behind his Master.

The pair of them could only nod and bow and, after a few more exchanges, withdraw. The visit, with all the hurried preparations, the absurdity of the Duke's disguise, the anti-climax of Charles's bland welcome, was a complete failure. James retired to St. James's Palace in a deep fit of the sulks, to which he had always been prone. His escort were left to their own devices.

It was then that John went to Sidney Godolphin to exchange news. He told him of the letter he had received from Hugh Offord, quoting most of the salient points though he had left the letter behind in Brussels.

Sidney was much impressed by the discreet allusion to Monmouth. 'His Grace makes mischief that will bring him no good,' he said. 'Captain Offord always seemed a most sensible young man when I knew him in London.'

‘But given to enthusiasms,’ John said with an expression of distaste on his handsome face. ‘As witness the pursuit of Miss Firle. A near disaster at one time. Now happily relieved. It is plain he may have another enthusiasm for the Duke.’

‘His Majesty will destroy all that,’ Sidney said with prim certainty. And he was right, for Charles directed his son to leave the country. Monmouth went to the Hague and waited.

‘Pray God he may,’ John answered his friend and went on to ask for direct news of the Popish Plot as it was still called. Though the ramifications of the early accusation were now countrywide, the King was in no danger from any of his subjects, but only from his physicians with their near-lethal methods of cure.

‘The slaughter of innocent men continues,’ Godolphin told him. ‘Perhaps the worst concerns the confession of a man called Prance. He claims to be the strangler who killed Sir Edmund Godfrey. He turned King’s Evidence, naming three accomplices. For this he escaped punishment while the others were convicted and hanged. His Majesty believes, and I agree, that this whole dreadful sequence was planned by Oates and executed by Prance. And so it continues.’

The King recovered completely from his illness. The physicians had been unable to declare its nature, but were not slow in claiming that their great skill and care had overcome it. They also declared that there was some danger of a recurrence unless his Majesty followed certain strict rules of conduct and diet that they prescribed. Everyone knew that his Majesty would do no such thing. But the physicians usually made like pronouncements in most of their cases, particularly those they did not, and at that time could not, understand.

Once Charles’s health was re-established and the rumours of his state, amounting almost to panic, had subsided, the nation seemed, by discharging this additional load of hysteria, to become calmer, more cheerful. In fact to be reaching back to its true basis of gentle laziness. Titus Oates was nevertheless at the height of his popular esteem, enjoying his extraordinary prosperity, while continuing his evil work of deadly perjury. Though there were no direct attempts upon the King’s life, he was insulted on his brother’s account and even his Queen was accused of trying to poison him.

In these circumstances it was obvious to Charles that the Duke of York must either return to Brussels or go, once again, to Scotland.

James had to agree. Colonel Churchill was sent off to bring the Duchess with her family and small Court home to England. They then proceeded in a body to the northern kingdom.

Chapter Fifteen

James was gratified by a much warmer welcome in Edinburgh than he had expected. He explained his new purpose to Colonel Churchill.

'Since we may not continue our rightful inherited influence in the English realm,' he said in his usual humourless, pompous fashion, 'we shall endeavour to bring some order to this other, our true native land, though it be but a province.'

His grating voice as much as the words persuaded John to reply as quietly as he could, if only to subdue his irreverent inner laughter at such silly pretension. 'Your Highness has full scope for the betterment of this unruly but most vigorous kingdom. It hath suffered too long from murderous savagery. As I understand it, the western clans have never ceased to make raids on peaceable folk in the east and upon the borders, while at the same time fighting continuously with one another.'

The Duke found little support in this answer and understood as well the carefully veiled rebuke. He turned to his other chief advisers, Laurence Hyde, brother of his first wife and Colonel Legge, Churchill's cousin and former friend. The latter was now equal in rank, for his promotion had overtaken Legge's, who did not expect to rise any higher. His present position under the Duke was as a military adviser in a country and terrain that he knew well.

Neither of these men ventured to speak. They saw that James was offended by Churchill's manner; also that his obstinacy would always keep him from any real enlightenment.

But afterwards when the three came away from the audience they went to Hyde's rooms to discuss the future. They found it ominous.

'His Highness plans a desirable course,' Laurence Hyde insisted. 'But it will not succeed. The Scottish earls even more than the chiefs of the clans, and they are often the same men, will take no direction from a Papist, even though the Plot hath never smeared the kingdom of Scotland with its murderous filth.'

‘Indeed there are many Catholics here who go unharmed,’ Colonel Legge protested.

‘And a Church of Scotland that is Presbyterian,’ John added.

They were agreed that the Duke must be humoured to keep his thoughts from his lost pomp and importance at Whitehall. John pressed for primitive operations against the more blood-thirsty clans. Anything, he felt, to allow him to exercise his true profession.

‘I cannot endure forever these futile, ceaseless missions abroad,’ he complained to Sarah in the privacy of their home, a cold, dour, grey-faced tall house not far from the castle on its rock. ‘I hate to leave you, my dearest love, when you are so lately past your danger. I hate to leave that little red-faced shrimp, my daughter.’

‘You shall not insult our Hariote!’ Sarah told him laughing. ‘And you know these last weeks you would rather have been anywhere than at home with the women keeping you away from me before and after the event.’

It was true he had been excluded from all direct contact with his wife but had endured it as desirable, remembering Sidney’s catastrophe and terrified it might be repeated.

‘At least if I chase robbers and murderers in, the western isles and mountains I shall be able to send you letters and have your answers within days, not months,’ he said, embracing her tenderly.

But his hopes of early military employment were not fulfilled. That work was assigned to Colonel Legge, while John was sent off once more to the capitals of Europe in search of money for his Master. He had to plead the poverty of the latter’s royal, Catholic person, exiled from a land where Protestant bigotry was raging so fiercely that his life and that of his family were in danger.

The family note came to an end, unhappily, when both the Princess Isabella and her young brother died of illnesses brought on, the Duchess was convinced, by the terrible journey to Edinburgh from Brussels, where they had been living so happily until Charles’s sudden illness drove the Duke from her side.

None the less John could find no satisfaction in his hopeless efforts. True, he established his personal importance in several European countries. He enlarged his personal knowledge of

many miles of countryside in northern France, the Netherlands, Luxemberg and Denmark. All this brought profits to him and his career in the future. But he had to go back to Scotland with empty expressions of sympathy and no bonds or cash. His failure abroad was matched, he found, by James's failure at home.

For the Duke's effort to subdue the unruly elements in Scottish society and promote peace, security and progress in all parts of the country, had been a dismal failure. In Fife, that agricultural gold-mine, and to a lesser degree in the Lothians, where the seats of learning attracted professional men, where trade through the Firth of Forth could find a secure outlet, some additional order did prosper. But beyond these parts attempts at violent control brought an even more savage response. Its was useless for James to attempt to send unruly spirits forcibly to the New World. They took to the hills and the heather, or if captured and embarked, for the most part escaped and returned, even from the other side of the Atlantic.

As the Duke found himself impoverished and always unsuccessful, so his temper became more coldly savage, more set upon revenge. Neither Hyde nor Legge nor Churchill could do anything to control his ill-devised projects. John, in any case, already exhausted by the failure of his missions abroad, was saddened by the loss of little Hariote, who died when only a few months old.

'They never live!' Sarah sobbed in his arms. 'They cannot live in this wilderness, this icy wilderness of Scotland. Her Highness hath lost both those pretty babes. She suffers and prays and is patient. I cannot copy her!'

'We must, my dear love, we must. God is good. We must believe it.'

Sarah knew it would be blasphemy to deny this, but in her heart she asked herself again and again why her child had been too weak to master what had seemed a common looseness of the bowels. Why had it grown worse, with vomiting joined? Why had the wet nurse's own child suffered, but only slightly? Why did the physicians do nothing to help? And why, oh why, had her sister-in-law Arabella, now the happy contented Lady Gregory, succeeded in bringing up her children of sin without trouble of any kind? God's ways were, indeed mysterious, Sarah told herself bitterly.

The Churchills longed to return to the south, but this was impossible. John still depended wholly upon the Duke for his living. The King's insistence upon keeping England from taking any part in Europe's wars prevented all his eager young officers from exercising their talents in real warfare. They must wait and hope. In John's case the frustration was made worse by his growing lack of confidence in his Master, who was proving day by day his inability to rule. It was a sour, unhappy outlook for the future, when this most unpopular heir to the throne would succeed his brother.

Meanwhile James continued to blast his own reputation. He realised that most of the Scottish nobles were against him, though they did not express their views in public. Only the Earl of Argyll spoke plainly, qualifying his acceptance of James's revised Test of loyalty. For this James accused the Earl of treason and managed to have him brought to trial, where he was convicted and sentenced to death.

Laurence Hyde was frantic. 'His Highness is more like to bring about his own death than that of the Earl,' he confided to John. 'I have heard threats that I know to be serious.'

'Pray heaven I be not asked to guard either of them' John answered. 'I can keep Holyrood safe for the Duke, but he insists upon going out to hunt in the hills. He rides daily about Arthur's Seat. He inspects the garrison at the Castle, where Argyll is held.'

'I have heard the King treats my Lord Argyll's fault lightly. He will reprieve him and that will incense the Duke further.'

John could only agree. But his chief anxiety was relieved when James sent him again to Whitehall to implore Charles's permission for his return. Together, the Duke pleaded through his envoy, they could defy the rebel Whigs under Shaftesbury and the revolutionary mobs who still claimed Catholic martyrs. Together, with the help of their strong, trained army, they could defeat all their enemies and secure the permanent help of Louis of France.

Charles listened to Colonel Churchill's presentation of his Master's case. 'My Lord Argyll is no traitor,' he said firmly in reply. 'You must tell our brother he makes mountains out of molehills. And that we cannot agree with any of his proposals, nor give him any hope of an early return, unless he accepts our

demand that he cease to flaunt his religion before our people. And now, John,' he said familiarly, in his old, friendly manner, 'you and I will have a game of tennis to relieve our minds of this heavy matter. I will expect you at the courts in an hour from now.'

It was a relief and pleasure to play with the King, who seemed to have lost none of his former agility. John was out of practice, for there was no tennis court at Holyrood, and in any case James was too much occupied with his misrule of Scotland to descend to simple, active pleasures. Controlling his superiority nevertheless, so as not to affront his sovereign, John won the match by a small, calculated margin.

Charles was not deceived. At the end of the game he clapped his young opponent on the shoulder, laughing.

'You make me feel my years, boy!' he declared, adding, 'You have become a very accomplished courtier. But my message to his Highness stands. England will not receive him. The Earl of Argyll must be pardoned.'

So Colonel Churchill rode back to Edinburgh, thankful to find his position with the King had not suffered, but rather been improved. Thankful too, that the Earl would not die a traitor's death.

When he arrived at Holyrood he found that this part of his message was now unnecessary, for the Earl had gone.

'He escaped, as we all knew he would,' Hyde told John before the latter was given audience to report to the Duke. 'He had nearly all the populace on his side. His keepers were blind and deaf and helpless when they were over-powered in the night my lord escaped. He lay in hiding, we know not where, for a couple of days and then the stir over him ceased. His disappearance continues. I have no doubt we shall hear from him at the Hague.'

'Have any suffered for the escape?' John asked.

'Not yet, for all who might have been concerned have likewise vanished.'

'The King hath publicly pardoned the Earl for his indiscretion,' John said. 'I bear this news to the Duke.'

'God defend you, then,' Hyde said, grinning.

Before he left London to return to Scotland Churchill managed to meet and discuss his mission with Sidney Godolphin. The

latter had now been made Master of the Robes and was very close to the affairs of the Court, which filled him with anxious foreboding.

'Charles may have refused his brother's plan for ruling the country again by absolute monarchy,' he said. 'In plain face his Majesty dare not attempt such a thing. The so-called Papish Plot has, I think, reached its height and must soon decline. But the people's hatred of Papists and the French is no less. Poor Lord Danby continues to languish in the Tower.'

'I never heard his particular fault.'

'Why, he was imprudent enough to sign papers proving the King took subsidies from France and he, Danby, took part in the transaction. He was impeached and convicted. He was only saved, not vindicated, by the King's action in ordering his imprisonment.'

'Yet he was the man who secured a fine income for Charles from Customs and Excise when he was plain Sir Thomas Osborne. That astute mind for figures could hardly be expected to avoid the dangers of high diplomacy and devious manipulation.'

'Diplomacy or greedy blackmail! Corruption in so many quarters I am terrified of some overall, appalling total disclosure,' Sidney went on, with a shudder of disgust.

'How so?'

'I dare not tell even you, John, for your own safety, all I know or guess of the present intrigues. The Court at Whitehall is sinking into wickedness of a darker hue than ever before. Greed of gain was always rampant. Now it thrives upon the evil example of Titus Oates and his followers. Bribes in all directions, for this or that project. Largely set up by the French Ambassador for his country's purposes. And against these ploys by the enemies of France. The Duchess of Portsmouth, I hear, is so deep in love with the King she hath abandoned her position of French spy. But she joins with Buckingham and others to persuade Charles to take the succession from James in favour of the Duke of Monmouth.'

'That he will never do,' John said with conviction. 'Even in Scotland we have heard he hath made a public pronouncement that he was never married to Monmouth's mother and that the Duke remains and will always remain, his bastard.'

Nevertheless Monmouth, again in England and daring greatly, began to make progresses in the west and north of the country, though not in Scotland. James was brought news of these exploits which sent him into another of his cold rages. He went about in silence, glaring at his disturbed followers, searching for faults in the performance of their duties and punishing any that he found with floggings for the underlings and withholding of salary, sometimes dismissal, for those of higher position. Even his most intimate courtiers, who could hardly be called friends, for the Duke was never capable of real friendship, were made to suffer from the gloom of his presence, becoming more and more uneasy as time went by and all news that came out of England was uniformly bad, in the opinion of his Highness.

During this time John had another letter from his friend, Hugh Offord. It was sent on to him from London by Godolphin, to whom it had been passed by another officer in John's regiment of Guards.

Hugh was still in the west, still a captain and stationed at Bristol now. He wrote to say he had had the great privilege of being presented to the Duke of Monmouth on the latter's fresh visit to his forces in the area.

'His forces he calls the regiment,' John said, showing the letter privately to Colonel Legge.

'Meaning his Grace of Monmouth?'

'So I take it. But Monmouth's overall command of the Army was taken from him long since.'

'Exactly. Doth Captain Offord not understand this?'

'Apparently not.'

'Then he should be instructed. And before Monmouth makes, further mischief with this exhibition of himself about the country.'

John agreed. But he also took Legge's advice not to write to Hugh upon the subject.

'Our Master hath grown so suspicious of all about him, even ourselves. I think he may open our letters to pry out new treasons. Your friend will no doubt be disillusioned in time.'

And so it would seem, he might, John decided. For Charles did not allow his volatile, ill-advised son, even though he loved him dearly, to pursue his foolish pursuit of popular support. He recalled him once more to London and after explaining to him

the full extent of his dangerous folly, sent him into renewed exile, with a real threat of sanctions this time, should he dare to reappear.

One further move Charles made to secure his throne against the terrible threat to which it was continuously exposed. His brother had a second daughter, now of marriageable age. A second pawn for whom a Protestant husband might alter the climate of total disapproval in which he suffered. So the Princess Anne, at Holyrood always stoutly defending her religion against heavy Catholic influence, was directed to separate herself from her father's household, holding herself ready to return to the south if and when her marriage was arranged.

The Princess, now sixteen, was pleased to obey her uncle. She understood the whole purpose of the order; she knew that her marriage was bound to be an affair of State not of personal choice. Like her sister Mary she was willing to submit, while hoping her trial would be less severe than that of the Princess of Orange. Not that Mary's life was all unhappiness. She was still childless and the Prince had taken as his mistress one of her own English ladies. But apart from this neglect he was not cruel and in many ways she had become fond of him.

So the Princess Anne accepted her fate, only asking that Mrs. Churchill, her much-loved friend and mentor, should be attached to any establishment set up for her in Scotland or elsewhere. This the King was willing to grant. So was the girl's father, though the Duke resented deeply his brother's use of the royal prerogative. He had agreed to his eldest daughter's marriage reluctantly. He disliked the Prince of Orange. Now he simply dared not refuse consent to the younger girl's disposal, though he knew it must be to yet another heretic.

The Duchess of York was sad to be deprived of the constant companionship of her step-daughter, of whom she was fond. She wept again over the loss of her own Isabella, that little Catholic princess for whom she had hoped to plan a royal future. She could only pray to God for the further gift of an heir.

Chapter Sixteen

The Prospect of another Protestant marriage in the royal house of Stuart did something to calm the national hysteria, though the fright caused by the King's illness had already driven much of the national emotion into a more realistic, healthier channel. Though Titus Oates continued his vile efforts, there were now occasions when his pleas were questioned, even failed. Accused innocents were freed, unconvicted. And when Oates attempted to punish the judge concerned for his reasonable verdict, he found the legal profession was against him. Surprised and alarmed he began to retreat, but it was a little too late. The habit of his success was still with him; when he found his generous pension reduced and his agents in perjury falling away from his rule, his base nature and dull mind drove him into open abuse that did nothing to restore his fortunes.

Charles watched the decline of the Popish Plot with his usual careful calculation of its bearing upon his own position. He even considered the calling of a new Parliament that might now be more manageable, since the Princess Anne's future husband was likely to be Prince George of Denmark, a decidedly happy choice.

So elections were held and Sir Winston Churchill was elected for Lyme Regis. The House of Commons was summoned to meet, but not at Westminster. Oxford was chosen instead and to that town the new members were ordered to appear, while Charles, carefully guarded by a sufficeint number of royal troops, moved to the university city to open the meeting.

His hopes were destroyed at the very start. Shaftesbury, leading the Whigs, put forward yet another Bill of Exclusion. This was designed to prevent the Duke of York and also any future male heir of his from succeeding to the throne. It also provided for the Duke of Monmouth to be declared the legitimate heir.

Charles was furious. He summoned Lord Shaftesbury to his presence. 'You know well, my lord,' he told his obstinate former Chacnellor, 'that his Grace of Monmouth, though he be our well-

beloved son, was not born in wedlock and we have pronounced this to be the truth which we will not have gainsaid. *Will not*, my lord.'

Shaftesbury, white-faced, with thin lips compressed, bowed low, then answered, 'Since your Majesty will have it so I must accept it. But there is no measure your Majesty's Commons will discuss in this new House but one that must exclude his Highness, the Duke of York, from all pretension to the throne of this Protestant land.'

'*Must*!' The King spoke with difficulty through his anger. 'What of the Lords? Have they no say in the matter? How would your Bill of Exclusion fare in our Upper House?'

'I fear, sir,' Shaftesbury persisted. 'I greatly fear the People, not alone the House, your Majesty, but the whole People, may rise in their just rage to support the measure, should it be refused.'

With unbreakable control of himself Charles brought the interview to an end. He sent at once for his chief ministers to discuss the position. Their reports were alarming.

The new Whig faction, as everyone knew already, had grown with the excesses of Oates and his fellow criminals. It had been joined by a number of former Cromwellian army men, old now, but still active in revolutionary fervour.

They knew how to raise the younger generation into active protest: they remembered Cromwell's genius for training men in arms. Already certain groups had been recruited. Small private armies did exist that only needed a strong military leader to form a most positive threat of renewed civil war.

Charles did not hesitate. He ordered the Parliament back to Westminster and his own forces to Whitehall. Before they left they dispersed, without actually coming to blows with them, those groups of half-trained, half-armed recruits the mutinous members of the new Commons had drawn to their side.

But as King Charles declared, 'Our 'Little Sincerity' lives up to his nickname. That treasonable threat of his at Oxford was sincere or it was madness. We threaten nothing, but if he and his persist we still may dissolve these obstinate, self-styled reformers.'

He did not act immediately because his niece's marriage was not finally arranged, but he left no one in any doubt of his final

resolution.

In Edinburgh the Duke of York fretted and fumed at all the delay, principally the delay in his own return to London.

'It is an outrage,' he complained to Colonel Churchill. 'My own daughter and I am forbidden to be present at the negotiations with Denmark. What do I know of the Prince? Beyond the fact that he is eligible, of sound mind and body, they tell me.'

'He is well favoured I hear, your Highness,' John answered, rather at a loss how to discuss the matter.

'From whence do you hear that?' the Duke asked, testily. 'I am told nothing, except that there be few crowned, heads can offer a suitable union for the Princess. Handsome or otherwise,' he added, spitefully.

'And very good-natured, I hear,' John ventured to declare.

'You hear! You hear! From whence come these would-be assurances? Answer me that!'

'Your Highness!' John was roused to protest. 'Did not your Highness receive a long report concerning the Prince George of Denmark? Together with a portrait miniature of the Prince that your Highness permitted the Princess Anne to see? And her Highness expressed pleasure in that viewing?'

James looked at the young soldier sternly. 'You are giving us an opinion my daughter did not venture to give us, her father. But must have pronounced it to her own intimate, who is your wife. A double indiscretion, colonel, that we bid you beware of repeating.'

John had no answer to this save a mumbled apology.

'He waved me out of his presence with no ceremony,' he told Sarah, describing the incident. 'I was indiscreet, I acknowledge it. But I only tried to comfort him over his new son-in-law. For a while I feared dismissal, even ruin. It takes so little to offend his Highness these days. He resents most bitterly his continued stay here in the north. And so do I, my dearest love, for in this restricted household of his it keeps me from your side, attending to him every day. And in addition brings me no employment of any useful kind.'

Sarah described John's troubles to the Princess Anne and then laughed over his complaints. 'He would not long so much for my company were there any fighting to be done,' she said. 'But with

my lord Argyll in exile and the clans attacking one another he hath no opportunity for his sword or his daring.'

'We must be patient,' the Princess said. 'I think my father must be allowed to come back with us for the occasion of my marriage. My uncle is driven by necessity in keeping him away, but his Majesty is not a cruel man. I thought so when her Highness of Orange was ordered into marriage against her inclination, but she is happy now, or as happy as she can be.'

Sarah knew what this qualified statement meant and regretted it. The Princess Mary had grown fond of her husband but on account of his relations with her lady-in-waiting she suffered a most unjustified neglect. In Anne's opinion, at least.

As for Colonel Churchill he found an opportunity for swift action soon enough, though not of a kind he either expected or enjoyed.

It was yet another mission of diplomacy, one of the last he was called upon to perform for the Duke. It was a final bid on the latter's part to have himself recalled to the Court of St. James. It concerned the affairs of the Duchess of Portsmouth, that 'Mrs. Carwell' Sarah had discussed with the Princess Anne.

Like all adventurers the Duchess, as time went on, began to wonder how she might secure her future against the time when age or her protector's inclination put an end to her present position. She did not plan to return to France. She had lost all her former standing there and her relations and friends had chosen to forget her. Charles was still devoted; he was generous. But she needed some secure and permanent income apart altogether from gifts.

It came to her notice that the exiled Duke was largely sustained by an income of five thousand pounds a year derived from the operations of the Post Office. She suggested to the King that this might be easily transferred to herself, since the Duke must surely be in permanent exile.

Charles was highly amused by the suggestion. He had always enjoyed the impudent extravagances of his chief mistress, his delightful 'Fubbs'. She put them to him with a delicious mixture of French archness, peasant avarice and sheer childish greed. So now he promised to explore the possibilities, while taking a naughty pleasure in breaking his wish, or perhaps intention, to James.

The Duke was furious again and this time the cause of his anger was not petty.

'We are to be robbed,' he thundered to his principal advisers. 'We are to be beggared by our brother's whore, whose jewels alone would provide her with sufficient fortune for a life-time.'

Lord Sunderland protested, Colonel Legge murmured support in a counter-attack. Colonel Churchill said nothing until the three of them were released together to make plans and return.

Then John said, 'Our Mrs. Carwell will never be persuaded to take her pretty claws from that Post Office bounty. His Majesty will have some difficulty in changing its recipient. But this would be granted him if we tempt the Duke into acceptance of a bargain.'

'What bargain?' The other two were blank of ideas and showed it.

'His dearest wish is to go back to the Court. He no longer fears for his succession, but he fears the Scottish nobles. They continue to abandon home and estate for a ship to Holland. They intend to come again with a sword.'

'So?'

'So he must offer that part of his yearly income in exchange for his rightful place in Whitehall.'

The others gasped, muttering that this suggestion, as so many others, would be refused. They went in again to the Duke to make the proposal. This time he listened without open wrath, but gave no decision. Two days later he sent for John and directed him to go at once to Whitehall to bargain further in the matter. His renewed and permanent place in the capital against a reduced pension for the French whore.

It was the hardest mission John had ever accepted. Not the least irksome side of it was the ribald reception he found at Court. Everyone knew the detail, no one showed any sense of discretion. The odds on his success fluctuated day by day, depending upon the King's frown, an attack of nerves on the part of the Duchess, an anonymous poem, recited in public, or set to music and sung with mock earnestness. There was even a threat of a duel, though whose honour was at stake remained obscure.

While the outcome remained uncertain and the gamblers made and broke one another's fortunes upon it, John found it

impossible to escape back to his Sarah in Edinburgh. But in the end he managed to get leave to begin his journey. He set off for Scotland once more, with the final terms to take from the King to the Duke.

It was near the end of April with Easter flowers in white and yellow masses under the trees of the great park-lands near the capital and in the cottage gardens beside the lanes through which he rode north.

Wasting no time he arrived in five days and went at once to the Duke to explain what he had been able to achieve.

It was immediately plain that James was far from satisfied. John put the position more starkly, his Master was affronted and dismissed him without thanks. He went quickly to pay his respects to the Princess Anne, who released Sarah to him, saying she need not hear his news for she would get it from Mrs. Freeman as soon as he was gone.

'Mrs. Freeman?' he asked, puzzled, when they were alone.

'A quaint conceit of her Highness. We are such very good friends we must address one another informally. I am to be Mrs. Freeman, while she becomes Mrs. Morley.'

'A somewhat unseemly, perhaps dangerous ploy,' John said, irritably. 'See that it doth not become dangerous.'

'You find danger everywhere, in everything,' Sarah returned, pouting.

'There *is* danger everywhere.'

He caught her to him suddenly in terror, crying out that they were moving through a dark world, a threatening scene, and instead of true guidance, Whitehall was a pack of criminal, licentious fools, gambling with their own death. Save only the King, God keep him!

She soothed and comforted her troubled love; she coaxed him out of his black mood and took him back to their tall grey house, where he was at once surprised and shocked by an infant's wail.

'I forgot!' he stammered. 'God forgive me, I forgot even her existence! How—? Henrietta? How—'

'Your daughter is well,' Sarah said gently. 'Well and thriving. Come. We will go visit her.'

The child greeted her parents with an abrupt change of temper, all smiles and gurgles of pleasure. She was nearly a year

old and had given no trouble at her birth. In the next few weeks her father took much comfort from watching her progress as she began to haul herself upright in a walking chair and from standing to begin to set an awkward foot forward.

But by the beginning of May the Duke's impatience drove him into action. There had been no further news from London. He had not yet given formal consent to that considerable part of his annual income being handed to the Duchess of Portsmouth. Nor had he received in exchange the necessary formal permission to return south. The injustice of the bargain rankled. His priests found it outrageous that he should be forced to condone blatant sin in such a fashion. He agreed whole-heartedly with his priests, though his own behaviour from early manhood had matched that of his brother in nearly every particular.

In May, therefore, he made up his mind to force the issue. He would go by sea to the capital. He would confront the King with his actual presence; he would dare him to continue his exile in any form or place.

A frigate, the 'Gloucester', was ordered to be got ready to transport the Duke. Together with his most important followers, but with no women or children, he went on board. Among those chosen to go were the Colonels Legge and Churchill. Several other vessels accompanied the royal ship. The weather was favourable, with light but useful winds and a calm sea. Nevertheless, off the coast of Norfolk the 'Gloucester' went aground on a treacherous shoal and stuck fast.

James, in former times, when he was Lord High Admiral of the King's navy, had often gone to sea in the warships and even at times sailed into battle. He prided himself upon his seamanship, though it was necessarily limited. His physical courage had never been doubted.

So now he displayed his authority and sent for the Master of the 'Gloucester' to explain to him how the ship must be got off the shoal. The Master respectfully demurred.

'Your Highness speaks truth,' he began, 'but it will not serve here. This bank is notorious.'

'How so, sir?' The Duke was unwilling to be taught and showed it.

'Begging your Highness's pardon, it shelves so steep, she cannot lie plumb but with the ebb that even now begins to run,

she will slide and list and slide again so the water and sand pour into her. So heavy loaded as she be, the danger is very great, your Highness.'

The Duke paid little or no attention to the Master's words. He knew better. He said so. The danger could not be imminent. The vessel had not suffered by her grounding. It was not upon rocks, was it, but merely sand?

'Sand be a wicked thing hereabouts, sir,' the Master insisted. 'The danger is very great, sir.'

As if to support his words the ship gave a considerable lurch at that moment while the list that had been barely noticeable before became much worse so that papers and charts, rulers, compasses and markers slid off the table, while the Master had to clutch at an overhead beam to keep his balance.

Nevertheless James persisted. He ordered which anchor should be used to hold the ship, how and where a kedge must be laid out.

How the cargo should be re-distributed and the passengers told of the delay but not frightened by news of danger.

The Master was horrified, but helpless. He knew the ship would founder. He knew the Duke's orders were meaningless. He knew moreover that the 'Gloucester' had come away in such a hurry she was so ill equipped with boats and rafts that there would be little chance for the more than three hundred passengers and crew on board unless preparations for rescue were begun immediately.

He went away from the Duke's cabin, determined to organise what he could. He found the two colonels, pale, distracted, clinging to the rail that was uppermost, with a terrified crowd on either side, imploring to know what had happened and why.

Disregarding them Legge appealed to the Master. He had a knowledge of ships and recognised the danger in which they lay.

'The Duke—' the man began.

'Will not listen?' John shouted. 'So we must drown, must we?'

'I would send to the ships about us if he would but see the danger and go himself.'

'Then send, man, send!'

'I have now but one long boat, for the others have been

crushed in the list. I must save that boat for his Highness.'

Legge groaned aloud. Churchill said, 'He might listen to you, George. You have served him at Portsmouth and elsewhere. He will have nothing to do with me since I brought him back uncomfortable news from London.'

For several hours they argued with James; they pleaded, they even considered force, but the Duke's stupid obstinacy was so strong they knew he would even fight them off if they dared to lay hands on him.

Only at the last minute he gave way. The 'Gloucester' was clearly sinking now, settling into the deep water, sand and shingle, just as the Master had foretold.

With his priests, his dogs and those of his followers he invited to join him, the Duke condescended to go off in the long-boat. The two colonels were among these. They were directed to draw their swords to prevent any others, uninvited, to attempt to board the longboat. None did. The passengers accepted their fate. The seamen were taking to the rigging in hope that they might be picked up from the mastheads when the 'Gloucester' found bottom.

They were disappointed. Though there were plenty of craft about, time had run out and they were too late to save any but the few who could swim or found some wreckage to cling to until rescued.

In silence and misery the Duke was rowed ashore. In silence his unhappy escort found horses and a coach or two to transport them all back to Edinburgh and Holyrood, where they were allowed to disperse.

The news had gone before them, relayed at speed by appalled witnesses of the disaster, for the 'Gloucester' had been seen to be in trouble only three miles off shore and everyone knew the danger she had fallen into. As always the Duke was blamed for it; this time rightly.

John arrived home dirty, bedraggled, hungry, utterly exhausted in body and spirit. He had eaten little on the journey by land and had no appetite now. Sarah persuaded him to drink some Scotch whiskey, and then got him to bed with a hot brick wrapped in flannel at his feet.

In the night she heard him groaning, then crying out. His nightmare was all of the last moments of the 'Gloucester' as he

had seen them from the lonboat.

She held him in her arms till he was fully awake, able to tell her through bitter tears how his Master had betrayed all those poor devils to their deaths.

'I cannot go on,' he whispered. 'I have no more faith, no more respect. This is the end. I have tried. Before God I have tried. It was my duty—'

'It is that still,' she whispered back, terrified of what he might do, such was his grief, his desperation.

'Not this,' he went on. 'Told all the facts and rejecting them for sheer pride and obstinacy. Murder! No better than murder, as God is my judge! I cannot serve a murderer!'

'Hush, oh hush, my dearest! You must not even *think* thus, never never speak it! For my sake—for little Hetty— never— never.'

So she persuaded and calmed him and drove the secrets of that night into the utmost depths of her mind and heart, not to be brought out for more than sixty years.

In the morning John Churchill, his face white and drawn, but quite composed, reported for duty at Holyrood and took his orders for the day from his Master in his usual smooth, obedient manner. No one who knew him, certainly no one else, could guess, even imagine, that his long allegiance to James, Duke of York, was dead.

Chapter Seventeen

Permission to return south did come to the Duke very soon after his mishap on his sea voyage. For this was how he alluded to the tragedy of the 'Gloucester' on the few occasions when he felt inclined to do so.

He and his family and the remains of his Court in Scotland travelled by road and took up their residence in and about St. James's Palace. Certain rewards were handed out to those of his establishment who had striven hardest on his behalf. Colonel Churchill was the one most favoured by the King. He promoted him to the command of the Second troop of the Life Guards, which bore for him an increase in salary.

For the King's confidence was returning with the decline of the Popish Plot. The people were tired of blood; the old Cromwellian supporters had over-reached themselves; their self-righteous outpourings, as before, were self-defeating. The ordinary Englishman in the countryside, the hard working shop keeper, the patient craftsman at loom or bench, had never felt much real hatred of Catholics until he was told to believe that these people were foreigners because they held a foreign belief. But the poor wretches on the scaffold he had seen or heard about had, except for some of the priests, been Englishmen and women. The ordinary Englishman turned his back upon the hysterical followers of Titus Oates.

Charles noted the change of opinion in the country. He had waited for it and hoped it might come. Here it was at last, the light in the dawn sky, the first clearing of the storm clouds from the horizon.

Though he had first prorogued and then dissolved that Parliament he had called to Oxford, he knew that Shaftesbury had made every attempt, even against the law of the land, to pursue his Bill of Exclusion from the succession of the Duke of York in favour of the Duke of Monmouth. It was presented, quite illegally, to the House of Lords. They threw it out.

At once Charles acted, this time against Shaftesbury himself. In spite of difficulties he began the process of impeachment. The

man spoke openly of his followers' republican aims. Surely this was treason and would be found to be such? 'Little Sincerity', if the nickname had not now to be changed to 'Little Fraud', had put his own neck in the noose, or rather under the axe. The King intended that it should fall.

This threat, though still secret, was enough. Shaftesbury's intelligence system was better than the monarch's. Without any outward sign at all the former Chancellor collected the papers, goods, friends and servants he trusted and very quietly left the country for Holland.

He met with little welcome there, failing entirely with the Prince of Orange, who already had a good eye and nose for decaying statesmen. Shaftesbury could not endure both exile and neglect. Perhaps his excesses of the last few years were brought on by the advance of slow disease, never acknowledged, never diagnosed. At all events his exile was short for he died in January of the following year.

Charles was told of it. He gave no outward sign of triumph, but he said to Godolphin, who was present, 'Our early Chancellor, after that old schoolmaster, Clarendon, hath finally relieved us of his comparable lessons and scoldings and treasonable intrigues. 'Little Sincerity', so clever, so quick, so entirely unprincipled, so devoted to his own career. I shall miss watching his tricks and turns.'

Then turning to the Earl of Sunderland who was never absent from any occasion of importance, he asked, 'How think you, my lord; are we yet safe enough to free my Lord Danby, or must he yet suffer our supposed displeasure?'

There were only four of his intimates present to hear the news of Shaftesbury's death, the others being Laurence Hyde and John Churchill, both sent by James because he himself was suffering from a cold in the head.

Sunderland shook his head, Hyde and Godolphin looked horrified. Charles laughed.

'I frighten you all, my lords and gentlemen! Come, John, a game of tennis! My Lord Rochester, go bring my brother to the court. Tell him a game against such adversaries will make him sweat and cure his rheum.'

He sent no other message to the Duke, being quite sure the news about Shaftesbury must have been given to him already.

But he ordered that the full circumstances be announced to the Upper House of Parliament, and any request for a national memorial, a funeral at the dead man's home and so on, should be debated and a report submitted to him in Council.

There was little stir in the country, but among the more radical souls, the resurgent Cromwellians, the news of Shaftesbury's end roused all the bitterness bred of the earl's dismal failure and decline.

There was a farmer called Rumbold who had been an ardent parliamentarian in former times. He was one of those who had taken the recent Protestant and Puritan revival as an incentive to campaign both in the country and in London on behalf of the new so-called Whigs. He did not like Oates, indeed he found the man's coarse rantings and obvious brutality shocking. But he also discovered like minds, even aristocratic ones, in the capital. Among them was a certain Josiah Keeping, whose hatred of the King drove him to plan the monarch's assassination. When Shaftesbury's death came to be known, his sometime followers were drawn together by the event, by the need to continue the work the ex-Chancellor had begun. Keeping saw in Rumbold a willing collaborator. And so his basic wish began to develop into a plot.

Rumbold lived at the Rye House farm, a homestead and buildings near Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire, at a corner of the main London Road to Newmarket. It was a place frequently passed by the King on his way to and from the races. An ideal place, Keeping and Rumbold urged, for their real purpose, the often postponed, now urgently needed, assassination of Charles.

The scheme needed very careful planning if it was to have any chance of success. A king never goes about unattended. He has guards of various kinds for every hour of the day and night. So the first thing needed was a number of trustworthy plotters at Whitehall itself, in or about the Court, to assist in mapping the King's known future engagements and more particularly his planned appearances at the races at Newmarket.

Perhaps Rumbold and his friends took an unwise decision to manage their basic planning in London. They used several taverns in which to meet and varied the number and identity of those they called to their conferences. But they could not hide the fact that the same ringleaders were absent from their homes

outside the city too often and for too many days together and known to be so. It might have been better if the number of conspirators had been smaller and their meetings confined to one, totally safe, meeting place. For they had been noticed, often by reason of their different ways of speech, the country voice heard in Cheapside, the London cockney in Hertfordshire.

Besides, the grisly training of the Popish Plot had been well learned by the mean and spiteful, the greedy inquisitive. There had grown up a habit of eavesdropping that continued. Where a reward might be forthcoming, who cared how he bore witness, true or false?

The King's spies were always carefully chosen and usually successful. Their fresh reports were too universal to be neglected.

'The warnings increase all the time,' Godolphin told Churchill. 'Nothing we can act upon, but everything to make us uneasy. With his Highness still in town—'

'For the wedding,' John said. 'I would not think any violent act could be plotted to spoil that most popular union.'

'Nor I. But it is fanatics we are dealing with.'

'You know them? Their names, I mean?'

'Some names. Some so high we must know far more of them before we dare to act.'

'So we wait?'

'Until after the wedding, we wait.'

So the plotting continued, unhindered, until after the Princess Anne was married to Prince George, younger brother to the King of Denmark, and the couple combined their honeymoon with a round of visits in Europe. Sarah Churchill did not go with the Royal pair.

This successful family affair and act of high policy over, Charles decided to relax with a prolonged series of visits to horse racing events in various parts of the country. His favourite course was at Newmarket and for that open, wind-swept country he set out very early one morning, intending to spend the afternoon at the races, sleep at Newmarket, spend the next day on the course and return that night. It was early summer, with longer evenings and a moon moving towards the full.

The King travelled in a coach, attended by his gentlemen in waiting on horseback at either side. In front a platoon of

Churchill's Life Guards, in the rear a similar company of the Dragoons. John himself chose not to lead his troop but placed himself just ahead of the coach itself.

He had been warned, he was alert, watching for any unusual sign in the fields and homesteads past which they moved.

At Rumbold's Rye House Farm he was rewarded. He drew his horse to the side of the road, then passed it in to move forward alongside the royal coach.

Charles was lolling back in his cushions with closed eyes. But he had heard the scrape of hooves and rattle of harness and opened them at once, though he did not sit up.

'Yes, Colonel?' he asked, in a quick, low voice.

'Permission to break ranks, sir, and take Ensign Merridew with me.'

'Granted,' said Charles, allowing his eyelids to fall again. But his voice came as before, 'Report to me at the lodgings this evening.'

'Your Majesty.'

Colonel Churchill saluted and rode out of the way again, to halt his beast beside the hedge until young Merridew came alongside. Then he said, 'Forward, at a walk, till they be all out of our sight.'

He turned his horse's head and they moved back slowly the way they had come until they reached a gate into a copse. Young Merridew leaped down from his mount to unfasten the gate and hold it for the colonel to pass in. He led his own horse through, fastening the gate again before he re-mounted.

When they reached a small clearing among the taller trees of the copse Churchill halted and dismounted, followed by the ensign. All the orders had been given beforehand.

In silence each drew from his pack a plain jacket and taking off his uniform put this on instead. The new coats were not absurd, as the Duke of York's chosen garment had been on an earlier attempt at disguise. The two who remounted, their uniforms now stowed in their saddle rolls, might have been a couple of well-to-do country gentlemen; gentry, in fact, a cut above the yeoman farmer; prosperous, but not ambitious.

'Now, show me your right of way across Rumbold's land and particularly that large barn that stands apart from the homestead.'

For young Merridew had been born and brought up in the neighbourhood. He knew it as well as John had known the surroundings of Ashe and it was for this reason he had been chosen for his present task, that of directing his colonel, though he had been given no reason for the movement.

They dismounted again some distance from the barn.

'You will stay here with the horses,' John ordered. 'Be very silent and keep them so. If any man appears to question you, say your master is gone forward and you are bid wait for him. Nothing more. No hint of our true station and purpose. Understood?'

'Understood, sir,' answered Merridew, with a half salute instantly brushed away by the colonel with a warning frown.

It was a wait of no more than half an hour, but seemed three times as long to the boy. When Colonel Churchill reappeared, it was from behind him, for he had stood watching the barn, though he had seen no one approach it or near it, enter or emerge.

'Mount and away,' John said crisply. 'Your part now, Ensign Merridew. A hidden track and short cut back to the Newmarket road as far along it as maybe.'

'Yes, sir,' the boy answered, confidently, as they moved gently off among the trees.

In Newmarket that night, after a somewhat curtailed appearance on the course, Colonel Churchill was admitted to the King's presence. The attendants closed the door upon him, excluding themselves by royal command.

'Your Majesty,' John began. 'It is as I feared. At the Rye House Farm preparations are made for an ambushed attack. Conspirators are gathering. I have identified the livery of at least one great noble. There were scouts taking up positions in the woods.'

'You discovered all this? How?'

'By reasonable discretion. Such as I met I nodded to and passed on. Nobody knew me, nor did I speak to any. They were stowing gear in a great barn. They had none placed to question strangers.'

'And the scouts?'

'Merridew and I caught glimpses of them as we moved off through the woods.'

Charles groaned aloud. He could endure the defection of common men but that any member of the aristocracy planned to harm him seemed to be treachery of the baser sort.

John waited, but as the King did not speak he went on. ‘I feel sure they will have watched your Majesty pass the farm this morning. They will have noted the strength of your Majesty’s guard, they will have seen the coach and will remember its trappings, the four greys, the royal liveries.’

‘But they did not recognise you?’

‘As I said I was not questioned. There is no way of knowing. They did not interfere.’

‘So they intend to strike upon our return,’ Charles said, apparently unmoved, but speaking slowly. ‘Well, Colonel Churchill, how do you intend we shall meet them?’

‘With vigour, sir,’ John answered. ‘But with your Majesty’s permission at least four hours earlier than I expect them to attack.’

Charles laughed. ‘You mean I should leave Newmarket early? Run for it, in fact?’

‘No, sir. Anticipate. With permission a different coach, a small escort in late afternoon. Then the royal equipage, but empty, at the time expected. With a guard ready and most willing to fight off and destroy the would-be assassins.’

The King considered for a time. He got up and walked about the hotel room where he had stayed so often before without expecting danger from any quarter. When he came back to his chair at last his eyes were bright and he was smiling.

‘I admire your plan and your strategy, John,’ he said. ‘But we will play it more simply, more in character with our public image as we know it to be. We will give out the hour of our going as before arranged. All Newmarket will hear it and prepare to line the streets. Then without warning we will assemble at the race course itself, the coach with our servants and all our baggage. We will be off to the south before the landlord hath fully understood what we must have intended from the first hint of danger.’

John shook his head. ‘The evil men will have their scouts in Newmarket, your Majesty. They will realise what is happening and make for the farm to report while your Majesty’s coach is going to the course. They will be at the Rye House before us.’

‘Us, colonel?’

‘Your Majesty and your guards.’

‘But not all our guards. Not you, John. Beyond the Rye House corner you do not anticipate further trouble on our journey, do you?’

‘No, sir. I know of no other conspiracy.’

‘Then you must find a way to cut off those villians from their base. I leave it to your ingenuity. Deal with the problem and carry out your solution personally. That is an order.’

‘Your Majesty.’

When he left Charles, John called together his fellow officers and laid before them the new plan he had instantly devised for securing the safety of the King. It was simple and it depended for success upon young Merridew’s local knowledge and the colonel’s former inspection of the country roads in the immediate neighbourhood of the farm.

The assassins, waiting at Rumbold’s house, got no warning of any change of plan. Their scouts upon the main road saw no travellers of any note pass by, neither before nor after noon. But their agents in Newmarket, behaving exactly as John had foreseen, did realise the meaning of the King’s appearance at the races with his entire retinue. They did set off for the Rye House immediately. They ran into Colonel Churchill’s ambush three miles from the farm in that lonely, copse-lined stretch of the main road where it had been planned to attack the royal party that night.

The spies from Newmarket made a brave attempt to escape. They were armed and two of them tried to fight while the third dodged into the wood. But the two were overwhelmed by the four dragoons in John’s trap while he and Ensign Merridew boxed up the rider they had chased through the trees. His occasional yells for help brought him no champion. In less than twenty minutes Colonel Churchill and his men were on the road again with three prisoners, gagged, shackled, fastened to their saddles, with their horses on leading reins. They avoided the Rye House Farm on a route led by Ensign Merridew, at a quiet canter along the grass verge of a lane. Then, back on the road again, they galloped away towards London.

Meanwhile the King in his coach with the whole of his retinue retired from the races after a light noon meal and passed quietly

by little used country roads to join the London route at Epping, well to the south-east of Hoddesdon.

His Majesty suffered no inconvenience and met with no obstacle. He was half inclined to believe that his agents had exaggerated the danger, until Colonel Churchill came to him with an account of his action, in which three prisoners had been taken and were in custody in the Tower where their questioning had begun.

'They know very little, your Majesty,' John said, seeing a look of distaste cover the King's face. 'They were given but one order, to follow your Majesty's movements at the racecourse and if it differed from that announced, to ride back to Rumbold's and report it. This they did – or rather attempted to do.'

'And failed, of course. We have already heard from that captain of Dragoons who saw you ride off and trap your personal prisoner. He called it a miracle of precision and daring. We are deeply grateful.'

He held out a hand for John to kiss, which he did as expected, kneeling. His heart was full; he had been allowed to perform a service of the kind he knew best how to manage.

Reward followed swiftly. Within a few days John received the colonelcy of the King's own Regiment of Dragoons, a very profitable command. At the same time, for his past services in Scotland and abroad on behalf of the Duke of York, he was created Baron of Aymouth in the Scottish peerage.

Chapter Eighteen

Sarah was delighted with the change in their fortunes. After John brought her the news she put on her only court dress and ordered him his favourite dishes for their supper that evening.

'So, my lady,' he said, holding her at arm's length before drawing her close to kiss her warmly, 'I merit thy approval at last, do I?'

'My lord, when have I ever not approved of all thou art and hast achieved?'

He laughed. 'Often. But I will not remember the occasions, now or ever again.'

'Ungallant lord! But I forgive you!'

They hugged and kissed again, then remembering little Henrietta ran away to her nursery to break the news to her and her nurse. Hariote, as they had now begun to call her, stared at them, for the words meant nothing whatever to her. However, she understood that her parents were in a state of excitement so she was stimulated into showing off her powers of walking, pushing her chair before her very hard, then taking her hands away to walk two steps without its support. Their applause made her reckless, so she overreached herself and fell full length on her stomach.

'That was our fault; she was overcharged,' Sarah said as they left the howling Henrietta in the arms of her nurse.

'She will have worse mishaps when they take away the silly chair,' John answered. 'And then learn to walk twice as fast.'

'Heartless one!' Sarah answered. 'Would you train her, poor mite, as you do your soldiers?'

He felt inclined to say 'Less hardly than you do your servants,' but refrained, for this was no day for quarrelling, even in jest.

Much more important, he knew, was to find a new home suitable for his upward surge of fortune, his new social I standing. And here Sarah was able at last to contribute something material in addition to her already priceless moral and spiritual support. There was a Jennings property not far from St. Albans that had for some time lain unoccupied. It was

made up of a pleasant smallish house standing in open grounds amid the rolling hills and farmland they both knew and liked. It was conveniently near to London; though neglected for several years the house was in sound condition and needed little in the way of renovation, nothing in repair.

John had sufficient private funds from all his past careful saving and from those presents, considered by many to be nefarious immoral earnings, he had preserved from his youth with the help of Lord Halifax. Into Holywell House, therefore, the Churchills moved and stayed happily for many years – for at least the next three years in a peace and security they had never before enjoyed.

Within a year Henrietta was joined by a little sister, named Anne after the princess whose friendship had not faded with her marriage, but only grew, on the royal side, more and more ardent. Even embarrassingly so, as the poor young woman's yearly striving for an heir produced a lengthening string of miscarriages, stillbirths or infant deaths.

Sarah was attached to the Princess Anne's household on the latter's return to England, where she settled with her husband, keeping a small personal Court that was not much more than a modest collection of friends and servants. Here Sarah, as the designated Woman of the Bedchamber, performed her duties at intervals when called upon to do so. The house they lived in was called 'The Cockpit' and formed part of the royal buildings near Whitehall Palace.

The country in general was at peace. At last Charles had triumphed over his enemies, by dint of patience, quiet cunning, profound political skill, a certain amount of dishonest manipulation, graft and lying, and superb effrontery. His throne was secure, his brother was tolerated in the capital in spite of his blind tectlessness in the exercise of his alien religion.

The conspirators in the Rye House plot were tracked down and eliminated with a ruthlessness that formed a kind of just revenge for the five year atrocities of the Popish Plot, now at an end. The Lord Churchill's three prisoners had not survived, for they were hanged at Tyburn; but they had given enough names, in an effort to save themselves, to guide the exposure of most of the main body, at least of the principals. Some of the nobles involved fled abroad, to come back later greatly daring, in the

train of the Duke of Monmouth. Others, more prudent, stayed away altogether, or later joined William of Orange. But many died, still declaring their loyalty to the Protestant faith, which they believed was put in jeopardy by the House of Stuart. The Earl of Essex, a prime conspirator, convicted and condemned, committed suicide in the Tower to avoid the axe.

Titus Oates was now utterly discredited. A court of law found him guilty of fraud and condemned him to a session in the pillory. His still faithful followers among the common folk tore down the pillory and freed him, but the mob was driven off by the militia and order and the punishment restored. Later, convicted of perjury, Oates suffered a sterner sentence. On two successive days he was whipped through the City at the cart's tail, an ordeal that many criminals would not have survived. But he lived and recovered, though his pension, his false robes, his false degrees, were all taken away. He had always lived by fraud; he continued, though miserably diminished, to do so into old age.

But the King was safe, still a pensioner of France, still head of a brilliant Court, still a great patron of the arts and the rapidly expanding sciences, still ruler of a country at peace with the world outside, and of growing trade with colonies, mostly in the west. For nearly three years Charles lived in peace and security.

And then, quite suddenly, he was dead. Of an apoplexy, between dawn and sunset of the next day.

The news spread with speed. The veil of peace that had covered the country cracked and shrivelled. England was again grievously devided. Upon one side, though at first in a minority, was a hated Catholic, an untrustworthy Stuart, raised to the throne. Upon the other a true successor, seemingly of firm patriotic intention gave his loyal supporters a new promise to reward their attachment. The old issue at once revived, seizing upon men's minds and hearts, though at first it was hidden behind a screen of quite unexpected public rejoicing.

Old Sir Winston Churchill who had joined the shortlived last parliament of Charles's reign as member for Lyme Regis, travelled to London to swear allegiance to the new king. He went to Holywell House to see his son.

'Now we can establish in strength this new party of loyalists they call Tories. The Whigs will be utterly overthrown. With the

support of the trained army James will reign as the monarch his father was until betrayed. And you, my son, will lead that army.'

John looked at his father with love and pity. The old man lived again in the days of the Civil Wars. It was impossible to persuade him that they were over.

'I am indeed colonel of the King's Own Dragoons,' he said, smiling gently. 'But I am under the overall command of my Lord Feversham, appointed by his new Majesty.'

'Feversham?' Sir Winston was astonished. 'But – but he is a Frenchman!'

'Even so,' Lord Churchill was no longer smiling. His face was grim. 'But naturalised and Papist and very much in favour, God preserve us!'

The old man soon after that returned to Mintern. He still did not fully grasp the change in the pattern of power, but he trusted his son. He went back to his books and his heraldry and the often querulous remarks of his ageing wife, who secretly resented being now lower in the social scale than her daughter-in-law, Lady Churchill of Aymouth.

The pattern of power was certainly again changing fast, as old passions revived, stoked and puffed up by the first unfortunate, prevocative moves of the Catholic King.

James rapidly proved that he had forgotten nothing, forgiven nothing, resented more than ever, the slights and embarrassments of the last five years. Against all probability, all reason, all Christian humanity, he still desired to force England to return to the Catholic faith. Where Charles had been secret, he was blatant. Where toleration was ordered he laid down a system of gross intolerance. Catholics returned to the posts from which they had been driven. Priests were given safety. Any attacks of whatever kind upon Catholics were condemned and punished severely.

It was useless for James's chief councillors to protest. The Treasury was in the hands of those men who had been his most intimate advisers when Duke of York, Laurence Hyde, now Lord Rochester, his elder brother, the second Earl of Clarendon, Lord Sunderland and Godolphin, now first earl of that name and made Chamberlain to the Queen. They had found James impossible to restrain during the exile in Scotland. As King the obstinacy, the bigoted religiosity, increased to the point of

madness.

'His Majesty is determined to ruin himself,' Sidney complained. 'Where can we find him even a pittance to live upon? True he hath expelled the Duchess of Portsmouth. He takes back those pensions and emoluments granted to Charles's ladies. But they have all feathered their nests most skilfully. They retire to comfortable lives.'

'Poor Danby!' Lord Churchill said, 'Freed but a year ago. His monetary skill should be available, I suppose?'

'At this present time we dare suggest nothing that recalls the late reign. It would be dangerous.'

'We wait, then, upon events?'

They looked at one another with meaning.

'That is so, John. Do you think they can be long delayed?'

They were not. Almost at once Lord Churchill was ordered to Paris upon one last mission to Louis XIV. It was a hopeless task he had been given and he knew it before he reached the French Court. But to his great relief his orders were revoked almost as soon as he arrived, for Louis had, immediately upon hearing that his Catholic cousin had succeeded his brother and was accepted without trouble of any kind, sent his congratulations and a useful, but not excessive gift. Not by any means an instalment of the size of Charles's regular subsidies, but not a mean gift all the same.

Lord Churchill was bidden to express the King's thanks for the good wishes and the gift. He was recalled home, his mission a dismal failure. Nevertheless at the coronation of James II he was given a barony in the English peerage; he became Lord Churchill of Sandridge.

Meanwhile the other rulers in Europe took note of the new King, but with indifference. For too long England had been of little account in their struggles with either Turkey or one another. They were not concerned.

Except for William of Orange. He had tolerated the presence of the Duke of Monmouth at the Hague, for the man had charm and wit and a most beautiful mistress. Also, there were in his entourage some embittered English and Scottish exiles who could perhaps be useful to him in the future. For was not his wife, the Princess Mary, now undisputed heir to the English crown? At least heir presumptive? The new Queen was still

young, but her children had not survived. Only the Duke of Monmouth presented a problem. Illegitimate, but popular. An obvious Pretender. Prince William directed his English Ambassador to inform the Duke that he must remove himself and his followers from Holland.

This move, noted in England, aroused a certain amount of anxiety. Even James himself was inclined to take it seriously.

Our son-in-law of Orange hath acted with propriety and good sense,' King James said to Churchill. 'Do you not agree, my lord?'

'I do, your Majesty,' John answered. He had indeed given William's gesture its full meaning in his own mind. The Prince, by standing aside altogether at this time, could only gain from anything that might come of it. If Monmouth stayed in Brussels, in exile, the throne of England would not be affected in any way. If Monmouth tried to take it by force, he would fail and fail miserably. For was not the new Lord Churchill at the head of the King's army, or at least its true effective force, and well able to destroy any challenge Monmouth could mount?

The Duke of Monmouth may well have agreed with William at first. He took his banishment from Holland in good part. Brussels was as familiar to him as the Hague and he had his friends about him, with more arriving every week as the new King's ill-judged behaviour drove them into active rebellion.

From English agents in Brussels report followed report of increasing visits from English friends to the Duke; some short, with the messengers returning to the waiting ships at the ports and their instant departure. Others stayed, increasing the number who began to form themselves into committees and after that into companies for actual physical training.

But there was little money to buy arms or service of any kind. The Duke's supporters were very full of good wishes. They even began to call him 'King Monmouth', but when they were approached for real material aid they often vanished overnight, to be heard of again in Paris, perhaps, or perhaps not at all until the end of the reign. Nevertheless the Duke continued to make plans and engage supporters to carry them out.

James took all the proper steps to guard the kingdom from an attempted invasion. The royal army was already on its way back from Tangier, for the King had decided to put an end to that

unprofitable colony, the dowager Queen's dowry. Other English troops abroad had engagements in the Netherlands. Again Prince William was quite ready, most dutifully prepared, to release them and send them home. Scotland could not afford to go short, James decided.

'The traitor Argyll will make trouble in the north if Monmouth moves across the Channel,' James stated to his army council. 'We must have force, not over-advertised, but sufficient to cut him off his Highland savages and take him for our justice, long delayed.'

He spoke without suggesting any need for discussion, so there was none, only orders given and promptly obeyed.

In all this Lord Churchill was given little part, since Feversham's position as Commander-in-Chief was confirmed from the first meeting of the army officers. But Churchill's Dragoons were detailed to prepare for the initial movements of defence, whenever danger should threaten.

'I have the work to do,' John explained to Sarah. 'Feversham will take the honours.'

Monmouth landed at Lyme Regis. He had avoided the English Navy ships off Dover, less by good seamanship than because the weather was at its most atrocious. For over a week his vessels had been driven back and forth in westerly gales until at last, still seeking a friendly port, he had sailed into the doubtful safety of Lyme Bay. Not on the Devon coast, where he would have found real protection, but in Dorset, all too close to the greatest danger of the English Channel, Portland Bill. His little fleet came to rest at Lyme Regis and disembarked shaken, weary, but still determined in their purpose.

The town had been parliamentarian and Puritan in Charles I's time and was so still. Or rather most of its citizens declared at once for Monmouth, though the Mayor remained loyal to the recently crowned King James. He saw the ships in the offing and immediately understood that this meant invasion. So he got off messengers to his member of Parliament in Westminster, who was none other than old Sir Winston Churchill. Also to the King's Governor at Bristol. Thereafter he bowed to the incoming storm, neither aiding or resisting. In common with many of the landowners and well-to-do farmers in the neighbourhood, who had suffered persecution and sequestration under Cromwell, he

had learned the art of self-preservation in his impressionable youth and had not forgotten it. But many others, the smaller men, the townsfolk, the peasants, small farmers, home craftsmen and so forth, joined the Duke's standard with instant, touching enthusiasm.

Their young leader was not well prepared for this instant support. In fact his willingness to undertake such an expedition showed only too clearly how little he knew about the kind of organisation he really needed. His companions were mostly untrained enthusiasts; only a few had real military knowledge. They had all, including Monmouth, imagined a population of native-born militia springing with the necessary arms to their immediate aid. They were totally wrong: there were no arms, except a few fowling pieces and such like, pikes, scythes, sticks and staves. After the first moves there was no mutiny in significant numbers; when the militia did appear the overall majority obeyed the King's officers, not the Duke's. Though a few companies took themselves and their weapons to Monmouth's camp, which encouraged him to go forward.

In a few days' time, therefore, the slow rebellion grew until quite a formidable army gathered at Lyme and, sweeping all before it, gathering followers daily, marched across the peninsula towards Bridgwater on the Bristol Channel, arriving at Taunton with about three thousand men and four guns delivered by rebel militia.

Meanwhile Churchill had been ordered to Salisbury with some of his Dragoons and some Life Guards. He had been given the rank of Brigadier-General, but as he expected, the Frenchman Feversham had been again confirmed as Commander-in-Chief. All the same, his father's news from Lyme led Churchill to make his main objects an instant pursuit and the setting up of a barrier to the rebel's further advance. He moved his small force rapidly to Bridport, then on by Axminster to Chard, where he learned that Monmouth had been proclaimed 'King' and was gaining recruits and rebel militia in great numbers. He was even invited by the Duke to join his 'old comrades'. He sent the messenger away without an answer and wrote a dispatch to the King explaining the dangerous situation that existed and the need for trained army regiments.

Monmouth had now reached Bridgwater and had eight

thousand troops under his command, still without adequate arms and guns, few horses and those untrained as cavalry. It was his lack of this arm that made him so vulnerable to Churchill's constant, highly skilled skirmishing attacks on the rear and sides of his columns, cutting off stragglers, diverting bodies of men, who were understandably lost in country they did not know, into ambushes where they could be attacked and destroyed, dispersed or captured.

The invader was fatally delayed, for when his continued march to Bristol brought him within a few miles of that city, he was already too late. He had been a fortnight in the country. It was absolutely necessary to secure at least one important city at once and he had not been able to do so. Feversham was at Bristol before him.

Churchill joined his Commander-in-Chief at Bath, where he found his youngest brother Charles in charge of artillery he had brought up from Portsmouth. This young brother, now in his twenties, had developed the family martial ability. John was delighted to see him.

'I have been riding through all our early haunts,' he said, as they refreshed themselves with long draughts of the local cider. Each had been in the saddle for the most part of ten days and the season being late June and a fine one at that, were very thirsty.

'Of which I have no recollection,' Charles answered.

'I suppose not. Nor of our local friends, our servants, your nurse?'

Charles laughed. 'Only old Trubb and that when we moved to Wootton Glanville before my father's appointment in Ireland.'

'So. It is an age since that time. Trubb. He did move to Mintern, I think.'

'Indeed. I saw him there once. But he died soon after. He took it very sore that we left Wootton and for a more modest establishment.

John nodded. He was sorry he had spoken about those distant days at Ashe, for the memories were not shared with this younger brother of his and yet they had revived thoughts of his former friends he would rather have suppressed. Hugh Offord, for instance. Hugh's indiscreet letter. Well, the garrison at Bristol was now under Feversham's command. Later he would

seek news of Hugh, but not now.

Monmouth must have known in his heart that he had failed and that to continue meant utter disaster. But it was not in his shallow mind, clouded by self-conceit and flattery for so many years, to face simple truth and stark ruin. Perhaps he thought to work back into the west, to take Exeter, Plymouth and the ports of Cornwall; to establish a bridgehead there, where he might consolidate his forces, find and train recruits, raise rebellion further north, through Wales and on to Scotland. He did not know that Argyll had already been defeated, taken prisoner and beheaded. He did not realise that his own retreat to the sea would prove impossible.

His troops could not understand the confused progress of the campaign. They hardly realised that they were now retreating in a wide circle below the Mendip hills, to come again to Bridgwater and the rivers flowing past the wastes of Sedgemoor. They were not only confused; they were hungry and tired. But they still had plenty of fight in them and every belief and hope in their young leader, their 'King Monmouth.'

The Duke himself, inwardly despairing, tried to plan some move to produce at least a temporary victory. He did have partial success against the royal forces under his half-brother the Duke of Grafton, another bastard of Charles II. Boxed into a narrow lane Grafton's men were only rescued by Churchill and Feversham, but with heavy losses on both sides.

From this point Monmouth's army began to crumble. They might be peasants, but they were no fools. They began to understand what they were up against and moreover they now recognised where they were, nearly back to Bridgwater or at least Glastonbury.

At last they were halted near Weston Zoyland, a village on the edge of the moor. The Royal Army had also come to rest, not three miles distant, on the other side of a deep ditch called the Bussex Rhine, and nearer to the main Bridgwater to Somerton road than their opponents.

Monmouth consulted with his officers. Either they abandoned their venture at once or they made one more bid to shake off the far superior forces before them. If the latter their only hope was in a night attack. If the royal forces could be surprised, their flanks turned, they might be defeated as Grafton's men had

been. Then with another forced march they might reach Bristol, now only lightly held.

This late piece of professional planning impressed the Duke's amateur commanders. It was indeed sound, but unbelievably risky. Nevertheless it was agreed to make the attempt and orders went out for the cation, which was set for a couple of hours after midnight.

In a black, clouded night the two small armies waited. The loyalists rested: the rebels tensed themselves for action.

Chapter Nineteen

Lord Feversham was bored. He found his small campaign an affair well beneath his dignity, both as a military man, nephew of the great Marshall Turenne, a connection he never failed to mention to new acquaintances, and as Lord Chamberlain to the dowager Queen, still living in England.

He had not started out with anything like the speed and efficiency of his second in command, Lord Churchill. But then the latter was always so full of enthusiasm for action. He himself, with his foot regiment of the Guards, had found no obstacle in marching to Salisbury and from there to Bristol. The arrival of Monmouth from the west had been expected and though there had been a slight setback later at Norton Saint Philip, still, with his army increased at Bath by Churchill's troops, that had been overcome. Monmouth had retreated as expected and was now to all intents and purposes beaten.

Lord Feversham, deploying his forces for a final effort near Bridgwater, disposed them in correct, but uninspired, formation, near the village of Weston Zoyland. His tents were put up in a suitable position at the rear, his newly arrived guns placed, his patrols arranged, his guards mounted. The two crossings of the great ditch, Bussex Rhine, were covered.

His lordship, with his officers, ate their usual elaborate supper, after which he withdrew to his tent, went to bed, and instantly to sleep.

Lord Churchill on the other hand, though he had had a tiring day following up and harrassing the enemy forces, took a short rest but spent the early part of the night alert, fully equipped, with scouts deployed to report immediately any suspicious movement across the difficult plain beyond the royal position.

For Sedgemoor was not an easy field for any battle. It was wild, uneven scrubland, intersected by three main ditches, or rhines, leading into the River Parret, that ran through Bridgwater to the sea. Churchill knew Monmouth well in their battles together in France; he had been close to the man in action of various kinds; he was aware of his personal courage,

his shallow judgement, his almost total lack of responsibility. The expected action now, unless Monmouth called a retreat to better ground, was bound to fail, unless a night attack came as a surprise.

With Churchill watching, cool, careful and thorough as always, there was no surprise. The scouts began to scramble in at two in the morning. Monmouth's forces had begun to move; they had crossed the Black Ditch, making very little noise and apparently led by local guides.

'My Lord Feversham sleeps sound,' John told his aides. 'I think we need not disturb his lordship at present.'

His officers laughed. They were in the habit of joking over the Frenchman's bad accent, his greed for food and drink, his military incompetence. But Churchill stopped them.

'My Lord Feversham may be French and hath never learned our language. But he is a naturalised Englishman, sirs, and as such must command our respect. Moreover he is and has been for twenty years a close friend of our new King. He serves her Majesty, the dowager Queen. We fight under the Lord Feversham's command. But in his absence at this moment from the field I propose—'

He smiled a grim little smile that would have raised a cheer had he not waved his officers down before their mouths were fully open. They listened to their orders, then dispersed to fulfil them.

The battle took its inevitable course. With a few well-trained troops, without Churchill on the other side, Monmouth might have broken past the King's army, enclosed it, paralysed it, rushed away north again, to Bristol. It was unlikely a victory at Sedgemoor would have led on to total victory, that the north-west would have risen, since Argyll in Scotland was already dead and that country crushed. But the campaign would have been extended and the popular will against a Papist crown might have prevailed sooner than it did.

But Monmouth lost the battle of Sedgemoor and even before it was over and his front broken his untrained peasant forces had begun to melt away as the militia units had done already. They threw down their useless arms and rushed back to their farms and homesteads, to hide or, if bold enough, to take up their former work as if they had never joined the standard of their

romantic, handsome young betrayer.

But the rebel attack began successfully as planned. Churchill's scouts were right. Monmouth's best trained musketeers, his stubborn puritanical stalwarts, did cross the Black Ditch and shortly afterwards the Langmoor Rhine. But then they became confused, for with the first approach of dawn a mist had risen from the watery ground, hiding even those features they had been able to recognise quite close at hand – certainly blotting out that picture their chief guide had tried to fix in his mind from his stand the evening before on the tower of Chadzoy Church.

Churchill moved to and fro along the opposing front, also cursing the mist, which was freezing his nose and forehead in spite of his wide plumed hat and making him cough and blink the water from his dripping eyelashes. He did not propose to send to the Earl of Feversham until the battle was joined; interference from that quarter would be dangerous. On the other hand if he neglected altogether to inform his superior he might well suffer for it afterwards. It was a delicate situation, he decided, but no worse than very many others he had endured over the last gruelling years of the late King's reign. And after all this was the work, the task he loved best in life. To hell with the French bastard! No, not bastard, that was the enemy and the noble Duke of Grafton, God help them both! Feversham, not that it made any difference, poor foreign devil, had been born in wedlock of chiefly noble parentage.

A splash quite near at hand brought Churchill to a halt, his small party of attendant Dragoons halting also, with trained promptness, controlling the jingle of their harness with their hands. Throwing his reins to the man beside him John slipped to the ground and crept forward, at the same time loosening and priming his pistol. He knew he was near the bank of the Bussex Rhine because the mist was thicker than ever here and seemed to rise from the earth rather than float above it.

The splash was not repeated, but water rippled and flowed, or so it seemed. A few seconds later the mist before him thickened, parted, disgorged three dripping forms. Of these two turned about and disappeared, while a third stood, sabre in hand, seeming to cover his companions' retreat. It was a figure, a stance, that John recognised with a pang of horror. His pistol

arm dropped to his side, he took a long step forward.

Hugh Offord, too, lowered his weapon. He also had recognised his friend, perhaps earlier than Churchill. Perhaps that was why he stayed, John thought. But to what purpose? Fear? That was not like Hugh. Remorse for his gross disloyalty, breaking his oath of allegiance? With blistering insight John understood his own indifference to Hugh's fault.

They stood and stared at one another, not moving, not speaking. Then John lifted his right arm to warn the other away. The gesture brought the pistol up, but Hugh continued to stare. Only when John, with a wave of his left hand, made his meaning plain did the other turn to slide silently down the side of the ditch and vanish.

The day lightened slowly and as the mist rose Monmouth's forces were revealed, still on the far side of the Ditch, and now in a state of some confusion. The Duke tried to use his small troop of cavalry to force the pace, but the horses were not trained for welfare; some were even too old and weak for it. Churchill's Dragoons rode them down; the flanks of the royal army were never in danger. Monmouth's planned pincer movement never had a chance of succeeding.

For a time the rebel artillery, consisting of four or five guns, did cause some havoc in the camp, especially among the officers' tents. The cannonade roused General Feversham at last, though he dressed with care and ate a French breakfast of rolls and coffee before emerging to direct a battle that had begun some five hours before.

It was Churchill's cavalry that crossed the Bussex Rhine by one of its two plungeons or connecting links. They spiked Monmouth's guns and killed the gunners, while supporting foot troops followed to secure the land where they had stood.

By this time the Duke must have known the battle was irretrievably lost. At any rate with his friends and immediate followers he left the field, attempting to reach some port where he could find a ship and escape to the continent. Behind him the stalwarts, still fired by religious zeal and native stubborn courage, fought on. Though their guns had been lost they still disputed their ground until Charles Churchill's artillery came into action, pounding and tearing the ground to shreds until the last of them still alive had fled or lay wounded and dying.

The cruel pursuit was followed with the utmost ruthlessness. Colonel Kirke, only recently arrived in England from Tangier with his men trained in Muslim ways of exterminating their enemies, found English farmers and tradesmen easy game. In Africa they had worn a Christian emblem of the Lamb of God in their battles against the followers of Mahomet. They wore them still, so that Kirke's Lambs came to be known as devils from hell, with which to frighten children for generations to come.

Lord Feversham too, with his French disregard for all peasantry, as he considered Monmouth's poor army, was determined to make an example of the rebels. All prisoners taken on the field were to be hanged forthwith. As soon as possible a special court was to be set up to deal with disaffection throughout the western counties.

The Lord Chief Justice, Judge Jeffreys, was appointed, and under his brutal, blood-thirsty jurisdiction, as unjust and terrifying as anything that had taken place during the reign of Titus Oates, the nick-named Bloody Assize marked for ever the real iniquity of James II's short occupation of the throne.

As before, a wealthy man could buy his acquittal. As before, the poor, the honest, the deeply religious believer, suffered. Many were hanged, many sent as slaves to the distant plantations. The Catholic King's firm intention was still to bring England back to the Pope.

He considered the total defeat of Monmouth as an early, triumphant step in that direction.

Lord Churchill naturally had to seal the success in battle with the retreat of the enemy and the end of his resistence. He knew that Lord Feversham had at last risen from his bed to approve and follow up his second in command's victory. But no direct orders came to Churchill. Feversham's indolence was such that he made only a general suggestion that the royal army would secure Taunton and Bridgwater and flush out any remaining rebels in the two towns.

John, riding into an undefended Taunton, found the notables in a state of abject terror, swearing that they had closed the town to Monmouth and diverted his fleeing soldiers to the west and south. Lord Churchill accepted this statement but left a

considerable garrison in charge. Then, with a few personal friends among his junior officers, his young brother Charles among them, he went back to the moor, ostensibly to deal with looters, who must now be moving into action.

'My Lord Feversham will think me zealous in the search for prisoners that he may gratify himself by instant hanging,' he confided to Charles. 'So let him. My general purpose is to discourage those fiends who will plunder the dead and dying. But above all to seek news of Hugh Offord if there be any to be gleaned near the Ditch, where we stood face to face before dawn this day.'

The distance was not great and there certainly were looters about, some of whom Lord Churchill's friends cut down as they crouched above their victims, some they flushed and hunted until they fell exhausted and were despatched where they lay.

And so the brothers reached the Bussex Rhine again and the place of the rebels' last stand. And John was right again, for he found Hugh Offord lying in a heap of bodies, gravely wounded, but not yet dead.

His left leg had been severed just below the knee by a cannon ball; he had wounds from sabre cuts about both arms and the right side of the chest. His face was drawn and grey, with eyes closed But he opened them when John spoke his name and tried to speak but his mouth was too dry and his strength too low.

John put his own flask to Hugh's lips and when the dying man had drunk a little he was able to whisper with a last effort of defiance, 'I knew I was lost when we met. I knew then for sure I was on the losing side, the village side. You will always win, John.'

'I would not have had thee lose, Hugh,' John said brokenly. He meant it, thinking chiefly of the old days of their battles at Ashe, but as well knowing he himself was in a trap from which he must force a way in the end. With tears filling his eyes he said, What can I do to help you, friend? I dare not try for a rescue. The orders are that all rebels must hang. They would take you from me.'

'Have no fear. I am too near the end already.'

He struggled to unfasten his bloodstained tunic, but failed and collapsed. John thought he had died, but he recovered a little and in the end confided to his friend a ring, a locket with a

picture of his wife in it and a letter, enclosed in a packet for her father, that he had written to her a few days before, when the battle at Norton Saint Philip had been lost.

'If they discover her and my sons they will destroy them, too,' he struggled to whisper. 'Keep them and give them to her if you can, but secretly.'

'I swear upon my honour she shall have them,' John said, kneeling and laying his right hand across his breast. Then, looking up to heaven he continued, 'And may the Lord our God, thine and mine, my dear friend, bless thee and keep thee forever.'

Charles, who had knelt beside his brother, echoed the final 'Amen', but when they looked down the grey face had relaxed and Hugh Offord was dead.

Together the two Churchills stripped off Hugh's uniform, his old uniform with the new Monmouth badge, and sank it in the ditch, together with his hand arms, belt and boots.

The body was indistinguishable now from the others about him, many of which had been ravaged in like manner and the proceeds taken for grain. Then they rode away to find the others of their group and all went back to Taunton for that night.

Lord Churchill took no further part in the aftermath of the battle of Sedgemoor. He had been sickened by the immediate excesses of the victory. He was horrified by the long extension of them under Judge Jeffreys. For days he was unapproachable, correct, polite as always, receiving congratulations upon his successes with an impassive face and cold eyes.

Lord Feversham, as John had foretold, received the greater part of the honour and of additional wealth. But since Churchill had shown the good sense never to mock him for his poor English accent nor for winning Sedgemoor from his bed, as all his other officers had done and continued to do, Lord Feversham persuaded the King to bestow a suitable reward upon his second in command also. Churchill gained higher, more lucrative commands in both the Dragoons and the Guards.

But he accepted these honours with a heavy heart. Though he continued in the King's service, appeared at Court, stood near the sovereign at public functions as he had done for more than twenty years, he knew now that the old intimacy was dead, that his position was utterly false, that his heart's allegiance lay with

Hugh Offord's corpse in a common grave on Sedgemoor Field. Even his revulsion from James after the wreck of the 'Gloucester' did not approach his present feeling. He told no one, not even his beloved Sarah, of the discovery of that dying childhood's friend. He hid away Hugh's tokens and the letter to his wife until such time as he could deliver them without danger to her and her family. Or to himself, he was honest enough to acknowledge. But the burden of concealment was heavy upon him, especially when Sarah tried to find out the main cause of his continued depression.

'Dear love, may I not share this dark news?' she asked. 'I know the sequel to that unhappy rebellion has been terrible in its severity. But none of that was your doing. The battle itself was cleanly fought.'

'Picked, trained men against poor, misguided fanatics—'

'*You* did not lead them astray! *You* did not punish them! Even my Lord Monmouth, taken in a ditch, grovelling in abject despair. Even he died bravely on the scaffold. We can pity him, can we not, for that final courage? But we can have no lasting regret. He wagered and lost. And so did his followers. They were grown men. You must not blame yourself for their mistakes.'

Churchill was silent. He refused to justify his gloom, his persistent withdrawal. In conversation he maintained this attitude, correct, bland to all strangers; attentive, intelligent, helpful in all military matters discussed with the King. But never gay, always serious, until even James suspected the cause and sent for him less often. Because he knew that in Churchill he was seeing the final barrier to all his mad, extravagent plans. He had dreamed of a Catholic country, forced at last to turn again to the true, the only true, Christian faith. Would that dream really never come about? Would a universal stubborn spirit as hard, as implacable as that he so often now saw in the soldier's eyes, bring him at last only defeat?

Chapter Twenty

King James continued on his path of self-destruction. His victory at Sedgemoor with its terrible aftermath led him at first to conclude that the conversion of the west of England was well on the way. It was quite useless for his government advisers to point out that the exact opposite was, in fact, the real outcome. And not only in the west, but in the north, the midlands, East Anglia, in the forests and downs of the south, in the City of London and across the river in Surrey and Kent.

With every move he made to help the Catholics, his action added yet another group of Protestants, affronted, indignant, disobedient, and so in the end, dismissed. In fact during the next two years he lost the services of nearly all those faithful friends who had conducted his public and private affairs from before his first exile to his enthronement.

The great slide down began with the King's attempt to impeach Lord Delamere for supposed treason connected with Monmouth's action. The charge had the flimsiest foundation, but the Earl was as obstinate as his Master and quiet fearless. Thirty peers were named as 'Triers', the infamous Judge Jeffreys was appointed to conduct the trial.

It fell to Lord Churchill as the junior peer to pronounce his decision first. He stood, uncovered, and made the formal declaration, 'Not guilty, on my honour.' Every one of the twenty-nine who followed him cried out the same verdict. Delamere had to be released.

The moderate men left of their own accord; such former upholders of the monarchy as Halifax, Albemarle, son of that General Monk, the first Earl, who had brought about the Restoration, and James's two brothers-in-law, Lord Rochester and Lord Clarendon. Bishop Compton fell into disfavour for refusing to issue notices to his clergy announcing the admission of Catholics to office. He would not comply and was dismissed. The Anglican clergy stood firm. They had suffered under the Puritan Cromwell; they were prepared to suffer under the Papist king. Only Lord Sunderland, always unwilling to lose his great

position in the government, trimmed his sails now and with unbelievable skill and effrontery continued to do so throughout the whole turmoil that followed.

James did realise in the course of the next two years that he was becoming more and more isolated. He had prolonged and then dissolved the House of Commons. Most of his sources of revenue had been cut off, since Louis no longer believed in his cousin's plans for England and was now seeking some other outlet for his insatiable ambition.

So James turned to the various dissenting, nonconformist groups in the country. It was a strange move and a desperate one. But the King knew that his only strength lay in his army, which he continued to build up, train and arm at the expense of all other projects. And he knew that these other religious fanatics, equally persecuted as the Catholics had been in the late reign and before it, would make wonderful soldiers if they could be persuaded to work for him.

The Anglican, Cavalier loyalists were appalled to see such men as Master William Penn, the Quaker, raised to a false position of intimacy with the throne, giving his support to what he must have known was sheer bribery under the guise of so-called tolerance. But naturally Penn and the other dissenting leaders were only too willing to see their coreligionists released from gaol, given back their houses and places of work. Was not part of the bribe a promise that if they joined the King's army they would help to defend England from the French, who might at any moment attempt an invasion? Perhaps they believed the King's promise. Perhaps they never meant to fight for James. It was enough to be free men, when they had feared death. And were there not those distant plantations across the ocean that Friend Penn spoke of so often? They were free now, were they not?

While James built up his army to some twenty thousand men the great English nobles left his Court to go to their country estates and begin to organise their own forces to fight the growing scourge at Whitehall. James appointed a Catholic admiral to command his ships in the Channel. Arabella, Lady Gregory's son, the Duke of Berwick, who was now eighteen, was made governor of Portsmouth. But at the same time letters were going to William of Orange from an increasing number of

disaffected centres in England. William understood their purport. He was the husband of England's heir. England would not much longer tolerate a Catholic king who appeared to have gone mad for his religion. He, Prince of Orange, was being invited to lead England in an attempt, universally supported, to displace the Catholic tyrant.

William was cautious, but not altogether unresponsive. Any move of his depended upon Louis of France. If the French King decided to attack Holland again, then William must with his allies meet that challenge. But if Louis attacked further south, in the Palatinate or the Empire, then those allies should be able to deal with him without the help of the small Dutch state.

In any case he could not now spare the services of his English and Scottish regiments. He would need them to be in Holland whatever his future movements might be. He guessed that James had asked to have them back in England for use in assisting, not repelling, the French. He knew that the King had been urged by Lord Churchill to allow him to go to Holland to take over their command. Nothing would have pleased the Prince more. He had a very shrewd appreciation of that brilliant soldier's capabilities. But James had refused: in fact Churchill, though still in close service about the King, was seeing much less of him in private, was sharing in the change of attitude towards his former intimates that led in the end not to their exclusion from the throne, but to his own.

William sent a trusted agent called Dykvelt to make contact with the Princess Anne. His mission was ostensibly to bring letters from her sister Mary, with news of both the Princess of Orange and her husband. In addition Dykvelt was to gather information as widely as possible about the general state of affairs in England and the prospects for William should he decide to enter the country in force to displace his uncle and enthrone his wife instead.

The Princess Anne was delighted to see the Hollander.

'Dear Mrs. Freeman,' she told Sarah. 'The Prince hath seen my letters to my sister. He fully understands the unhappy state of our beloved country. I will put matters even more forcefully direct to his Highness. Something must be done soon or I very much fear an action will be taken against me to force me to bow to my father's will.'

‘Mrs. Morley, I know you will never forsake your true religion,’ Sarah answered. ‘But, madam, is it wise to put down all your complaints and fears in these despatches that might be stolen before they leave the country?’

‘Dykvelt had complete immunity,’ Princess Anne answered calmly. ‘But we will say no more on the subject.’

Sarah told John all the Princess had said, which made him, as Anne’s most respected adviser, go to her urgently to argue against any more letters of complaint to her cousin William in Holland. Matters were serious, he said, both for her and for Prince George, her husband. They too had been refused leave to go to Holland on a visit, just as he had been refused command of the troops there. They must continue to live, speak and behave at all times with the greatest care, very quietly. As for William’s man, Dykvelt, let him visit others for whom he had messages in answer to their letters. But let her not entrust to him any written evidence of her views, nor of her recent outpourings to the Prince.

So the slow gathering of opinion, of purpose, of dissent, criticism, opposition, grew towards a state of open rebellion that took old men’s minds back to the Civil Wars. But this time with an even clearer resolve. In those old times the fight had been against absolute monarchy, but now to that issue was added the deeper one of a threat to the whole Protestant faith. Not a fight between Anglican and Dissenter, but a fight against Rome, the Pope, the Scarlet Woman, the Inquisition. And the French. Always that prime enemy, the French.

In January of the following year James proposed to repeal the Test laws with their penal sanctions for those who would not take the test. The general public was outraged by this, for it struck at the basic safeguard of the Protestant religion in England. Among the many peers who declared they would not support the repeal was Lord Churchill. It was another open defiance, which brought him a significant measure of neglect at Court. Though he still remained in attendance, James seldom addressed him personally and never singled him out for private audience.

‘I think I approach the end of my usefulness at Whitehall,’ John said to Sarah, with a very sad expression on his handsome face.

She had been alarmed about him for some months. This brought matters to a head. They could not afford his definite dismissal; not that James was likely to put altogether aside the most talented of his few generals.

'My love', Sarah suggested, with her most winning smile and respectful manner, 'would it not suit our purpose and those of my Mistress, the Princess, if she and his Highness were to pay a visit to Bath for a stay of a month or more? For health reasons that are real enough, God knows. Would it not be quite in order that I go with her and you too, to guard her and her train?'

'I see, beloved, you have your scheme fully made out and only want my consent, or simple agreement. Doth the Princess also submit to this ruling, my lady?'

They laughed and embraced, Churchill finding a good deal of relief in bowing to his wife's vigorous proposal.

Shortly afterwards, with the King's approval, the Princess Anne, together with her friends, the Churchills, and a suitable retinue, took lodgings in the City of Bath, where her Highness proposed to rest, enjoy the country air and take the waters. She had recently suffered another stillbirth, a premature male child, yet another failed future heir to the throne. Her sister, Mary of Orange, remained childless.

It was April and spring again. In the sheltered western city daffodils filled the parks, Dutch tulips imported in quantity since the Peace of Nymegen showed swelling buds; along the country lanes primroses and cowslips starred the hedgerows, with blackthorn shining whitely against the clear blue, cloudless skies. The fields were full of farm labourors at work, the roads were dry, travel was stirring.

And now John Churchill set about a mission, very private and personal that he had kept secret even from Sarah, but that he considered might with safety be discharged at last. He did not announce it until the day of his going. He simply said he had an errand to fulfil, it was King's business, he would go alone, he would be back that night.

He had decided he would not tell Sarah the nature of his errand, but when he said goodbye to her she knew by his manner that there might be danger in it and that as usual he relished that possibility.

'You will take proper care, going like this without even a

single escort?'

'There is little risk,' he assured her.

She saw in his face that this was not true. 'If I knew what time you will return—' she began, but he only smiled and kissed her, whispering, 'I will return, please God, but if I do not, believe and never think otherwise, that it is an honourable errand, one already promised upon a deathbed.'

'You cannot tell me, my dear lord?'

'Never while I live. And do not try to find out or you could hazard us all.'

He meant his family and themselves, but Sarah began to wonder if he was at last mixed up in the vast network of intrigue that was spreading over the whole country. However, she obeyed him, showed no surprise at his absence and merely repeated what he had said publicly, that he was out of town on King's business.

In fact John had set off, with Hugh's trinkets and the letter to his wife, to fulfil at last his promise to the dying man. The letter, which he had taken from its protective covering after his return to Holywell House from Sedgemoor was directed to Mr. Thomas Whitcombe, ship-master of Bristol. The letter was sealed and addressed. Hugh had spoken of it as a letter to his wife, Anabel. No doubt she was with her father, the ship-master. Hugh had taken very reasonable precautions to have it conveyed to her, but it was fortunate for Anabel it had not been found on his body, as it might have been if John had not discovered his dying friend.

Mr. Whitcombe was at home in a well-appointed house near the Bristol wharfs for the Atlantic trade. John was shown into the shipmaster's office. He waited until the clerk had closed the door behind him, then, still standing, placed the letter on the desk.

'I would ask you, sir,' he began, 'to open and read that letter, for it will, I have no doubt, explain the chief reason for my visit.'

Mr. Whitcombe, a square-cut figure with a strong, serious face and greying natural hair, took one keen look at John, then did as he was asked and broke the seal of the package.

It was as John had expected. A short note to the shipmaster enclosed a longer missive, that Mr. Whitcombe laid to one side.

'This is a letter from my son-in-law, Captain Hugh Offord.' He

touched the longer sheets beside him. ‘This is for my daughter, Captain Offord’s wife.’

‘His widow, sir,’ John said simply, bowing his head.

‘Ah.’ It was less an exclamation than a token of acceptance, even relief. ‘And you, sir? Your purpose?’

‘To bring this letter, together with these—’ Here John brought out a second packet which he laid upon the letter. ‘I was present at Captain Offord’s death, sir, upon the field of Sedgemoor. I promised him then, upon my honour, that I would bring these tokens, this letter and my news to you and to his wife. In that knowledge he died most peacefully.’

Mr. Whitcombe’s face hardened, but he did not speak. He rang a little bell on his desk and when the clerk answered it he said to him, ‘Ask Mrs. Offord if she will kindly come to me here. And, Frank—’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Do not tell her we have a visitor. Do not in any way alarm her.’

‘No indeed, sir.’

When the man had gone Mr. Whitcomb said, ‘Prepare me further, sir! By your voice and manner I would not put you with Hugh’s latest companions. But you are a soldier?’

‘I am, sir.’

‘Of the royal forces? In judgement upon me and mine? Or of the late Duke, in opposition?’

‘I am come as Hugh Offord’s friend, in fulfillment of my promise to him. Nothing else.’

With a warning knock the clerk brought Anabel into the room, bowed to her and left immediately.

She had not expected the visitor. She turned white, clasped her hands on her breast, but said nothing. John looked at Mr. Whitcombe but he only lowered his head in silent grief. It was left to John to step forward, take her hand, guide her to a chair, uncover and say gently, ‘Madam, I bring you news of Hugh, news it gives me great pain to speak, but that I think you must have grown used to bear after so long a time.’

His great dignity and fine manner had its effect in sustaining her to hear him. Also to speak quietly.

‘I was notified many months since that Captain Offord was posted missing, believed killed. Since I know had he lived he

would somehow have sent me news of it, I have long ago accepted his death. My father knows that. My friends also. You have real news at last, sir? Then give it me without delay.'

John moved to the desk first and taking the two packets from it handed them to her in silence. Then he began his story, watching her unwrap the tokens and unfold the letter while he spoke. The action, as he intended, occupied her hands and eyes, thus preserving her composure, though before he had finished his tale her tears began to fall and she did nothing to hide them.

Mr. Whitcombe, too, listened in silence. John could not decide how he felt, either about his daughter's loss or his son-in-law's fatal decision to break his oath of allegiance to his sovereign. But it was Anabel who brought the unhappy interview to an end. Her tears controlled at last, she got to her feet, laid Hugh's tokens on her father's desk and again turned to John.

'I cannot properly thank you, sir, for bringing me these precious objects and the news that will forever displace the horrors that have filled my mind for these long years. If there hath been any risk to yourself in doing so I pray it may come to nought until you are safe back from where you have come.'

She curtsied, then held out a hand to him with a small wan smile that tore at his heart and went on, 'Your words about Captain Offord's companionship in childhood match so exactly my dear husband's often spoken tales of those days, that I am sure I do not err in knowing you now. My Lord, I pray that God on high may keep you and reward you for your goodness this day to me and mine.'

John took the hand she held out to him, kissed it formally and made her a full court bow before he returned his hat to his head, bowed again briefly to Mr. Whitcombe, still sitting grim and silent behind his desk and went quickly from the room and from the house.

He returned to the inn where he had eaten on arrival and left his horse. The sun was still high in the western sky, with the tall masts of the ships along the wharfs standing up clean cut against the light, with their spars and rigging making intricate patterns there. He looked about him before he went in. There had been several pairs of eyes upon him at various times during the day, perhaps idly, perhaps with intent to report his movements. He could not tell. The Whitcombes and their man, Frank, would be

discreet. There had been no one suspicious near the house.

He took a quick meal at the inn before setting out for Bath.

The sun was lower, the sky a deeper orange, but his face was turned eastward and his thoughts were full of the scene in the ship-master's office. There had been strength there, strength of purpose, strength of will, bodily strength. He wished he had been able to see Hugh's sons, even just ask if they were well and thriving. But he had not dared to upset the patient, faithful wife any further. These were the people who made England; these were the people it was surely his duty to serve. Not a Catholic King, not men like Sunderland, preserving his power as in a game, not Feversham, the Frenchman. His mind was at rest now that his promise to Hugh was fully discharged and without apparent danger to himself or to those others. No one challenged him on his way back to Bath.

But his heart was not lightened, for he saw only a dark future; dark and infinitely perplexing. To Sarah's question that night in the privacy of their bed, he only told her, 'It went as I had hoped. Now it is done and we will never speak of it again.'

And with that she had to be content.

Chapter Twenty-One

In late April King James continued his self-destructive acts with a Declaration of Indulgence, giving complete freedom to Roman Catholics. He had already promised high office to several of them. The bishops were again ordered to display notices of the Declaration in all their parish churches. They again refused and as many as could conveniently be found were seized and put in the Tower.

In May the Princess Anne with her retinue and her friends, the Churchills, returned to their London house, the Cockpit, near the palace of Whitehall.

In June, to the mingled astonishment and consternation of the whole country, Queen Mary of Modena gave birth to her seventh child, a boy.

Very few people had known that this event was expected. The Queen herself had been reticent throughout her pregnancy. It had come after a considerable interval and her sad history of infant loss tore up any hope or joy she may have felt on discovering the truth of her condition. Apart from the Queen herself a like feeling of uncertainty settled upon her female attendants and those few in the higher ranks of her establishment that she entrusted with the news.

As Chamberlain to the Queen, Godolphin knew, but she had made him promise to keep the matter a secret in case the outcome should be only yet another tragedy.

‘At this particular time, my lord,’ her Majesty confided to Sidney, ‘the matter would not be such as to cause universal rejoicing. These cold, stiff English have never showed me any kindness. They frighten me less than those savage Scots, with their flaming hair and their ice-blue eyes.’ She shuddered. ‘But even my dear daughter, the Princess Anne, would find the news unwelcome.’

Godolphin could only bow and promise obedience. He admired and liked the Queen for her gentle ways and her sincere piety, even in a hated religion. His feeling for her position made the King’s actions seem doubly noxious, but of necessity,

endurable.

Knowing Sarah well by this time, Sidney was not sorry to be forbidden to confide the astonishing news to John. All the same, by an unrecorded feminine route, Anne was made aware of the pregnancy. In view of her own continuing failure to breed normally, she chose to make little of it and said so to Sarah.

'When I attend the birth and see with my own eyes the true link between mother and child, then will I grant the truth of it. Not otherwise.'

And so it fell out. For some reason, or rather gross unreason, total stupidity, the King failed to summon to the birth all those great personages and important witnesses whose presence the Law and Custom of hundreds of years had made necessary at the birth of kings. But the Archbishop of Canterbury was in the Tower with the other bishops; the greatest of the hereditary earls were absent on their estates, preparing for the downfall, a second time, of an unendurable monarch. Even the step-daughter of the Queen, the Princess Anne, second in succession to the throne hitherto, was not commanded to appear at the birth but merely informed of it afterwards.

'I do not believe it!' Anne cried, passing on the news to her husband. 'It simply cannot be true! They must have known there was no child. Otherwise I would have been told to appear. *I will not believe it*!'

'There most certainly is a child,' Prince George told her. 'And it is a boy. See. The report is plain enough and the child is male. An heir, it would seem.'

The Princess Anne shook her head vigorously. 'Then if there is a child it is not the Queen's, or they would have insisted upon my watching the actual delivery. No, if there is indeed a child, then it must have been brought into the Queen's bed in a warming pan or by some such means as that.'

Prince George laughed heartily at this. But it was no joke, never intended as such by the seriously-minded Princess. In fact others, many others, cast doubts upon the true identity of the little Prince and the warming pan theory occurred to so many disaffected minds throughout the country that it grew into a legend and as such joined King Alfred's cakes and Richard Coeur de Lion's minstrel and the crown in the thornbush at Bosworth field and all similar folk tales.

Later that summer the bishops were tried and were all acquitted. The Anglican church resumed its duties in the cathedrals and churches. In Europe King Louis decided to attack the Empire and his troops began to march, but not towards Holland. The Prince of Orange, assailed by an increasing flow of invitations from England for help to overthrow a tyrant, began to assemble his forces, his arms and artillery, his stores, his ships, his allies.

Still in formal attendance upon the King, John Churchill made up his mind at last. The behaviour of James at the birth of his son was the last straw. Before that event Churchill saw a reign continuing for the rest of a life already well on the way to normal completion. After that, there would have been a welcome reversion, with the accession of the Princess Mary of Orange. All that England demanded of its Ruler would be secured, the Protestant religion, the exclusion of Papists from power and positions of State, direct action against France. That prospect was now excluded by a different successor; a Catholic prince, ushered into the world almost secretly by a Catholic father with open contempt and neglect of English custom. To be brought up to inherit all his father's mistakes and affronts, to encourage even union with France in the end.

It was too much. In August of that year, 1688, writing in clear longhand, not as all others had done, in cipher, Lord Churchill offered his honour, his allegiance, his sword, to Prince William of Orange, should the Prince decide to come to England to rescue the realm from its present unhappy position. He signed it 'Churchill' and sent it secretly to Holland.

It only needed this important assurance to drive William into full action. His preparations were already well advanced. Now he would have the open, whole-hearted backing of the best soldier in Europe. He could not lose, even in the unlikely event of an actual fight going against him, for was not Churchill totally committed? Was not his open letter worth more than anything he already possessed in the way of blackmail, whichever way his fortune served him? The risk was still great, but with Louis attacking elsewhere and Churchill ready to join him, the odds were fair enough.

In October William set out, with a small but highly trained and efficient multi-racial army of English, Scottish, Irish,

Swedes, Danes and Dutch, in about five hundred ships, including most of the Dutch navy. Before they were half across the North Sea they met a westerly gale and were driven back to Holland, in some disorder, but with very little loss.

The mishap did nothing much to harm William's forces, but it did give James in England a rather longer period of warning. Not that he had not already grasped the meaning of William's recent actions and preparations and had begun to prepare for invasion, which seemed likely to take place somewhere along the eastern seaboard, probably in Yorkshire.

In consultation with his generals he made plans for the disposal of his forces. He too had a trained and organized army by this time, about equal to that of Cromwell at the height of the latter's power. Some must hold London, with the Thames and the Cinque Ports, Kent and the Home Counties. Some must march forthwith, prepared to repel an invader wherever he was sighted making in towards the coast. In this connection Lord Danby was to be feared and the great northern lords, in Derbyshire, Cheshire, Northumberland, where the sometime Chancellor had been most active since his dismissal not long after his release from the Tower.

As a rallying point James chose Salisbury as he had done before. He re-appointed as his Commander-in-Chief Lord Feversham together with Feversham's brother, another Frenchman, General Roye. Churchill was raised to Lieutenant-General of Dragoons, but though he was present at the Army Council meetings, he was not invited to speak.

In fact his position had grown critical. He still served the King with correctness, respect and apparent devotion. But he knew that James doubted his continuing allegiance, he knew the Frenchmen suspected him of planned treachery and would go to any lengths to prove it in time to remove him. Yet timing was all important. To defect too soon would be fatal. In any case it would mean flight aborad, leaving Sarah behind. Unthinkable.

So the duel of wills, of strategy, of control, went on. James certainly doubted. He had very little positive evidence. While Churchill was in Bath, reports had it, he had seen no one already suspect. A visit to Bristol, object altogether unknown, had been mysterious, but had not been followed up in any way.

James could not believe that Churchill's long faithful service

could be broken, that his former page's care for his Master's royal and sacred person no longer operated, that gratitude for so many years of patronage, favour, gifts, of ever-mounting position, could be set aside. He could not act upon suspicion only. But he could not cease to suspect.

When William set out again England was well prepared. According to plan much of the army was assembled and continued to assemble at Salisbury. Churchill's cousin and friend, George Legge, now Lord Dartmouth, was in command of war ships in the mouth of the Thames, ready to fall upon the Dutch invaders as they sailed up the east coast to those Yorkshire ports where they were expected.

But now the weather took William's side. After the gale the wind went into the north-east and so, under full sail, William drove past Dover and down the Channel, escaping Dartmouth's opposition altogether, for the same wind boxed up the English fleet in the Thames and delayed the ships that had sheltered in the Channel ports from the recent gale. In fact this excellent wind blew so well that William nearly drove on into the Atlantic and only with difficulty made back to Torbay and anchored at last off Brixham, where he went ashore.

He was not at first greeted with any kind of enthusiasm. The west had learned a bitter lesson at Sedgemoor. They waited cautiously, unwilling to move. But William soon showed that he was no Monmouth, seeking a quick conquest, however bloody. In fact he wanted no open warfare at all. He had come to defend the Englishman's right to his own religion and his own law, passed by his own parliament. He had come to persuade his uncle, by a show of force, but no wish to fight, that the King's rule must be modified. Practice his unpopular religion if he must, but in private. Discourage all other Papists. Let them go live in France. Had not Louis driven out the French Hugenots, some of whom were here in William's army, having nowhere else to go?

For Churchill the crisis, the moment to declare himself, came very soon after William had landed. For Lord Cornbury, son of Lord Clarendon, attempted to desert to the Prince of Orange, taking his command with him on a pretence of opposing the invader. His plan was upset by the young Duke of Berwick, who had already proved his military worth. Cornbury did escape to

William, but most of his troops returned to Salisbury, bewildered and indignant.

James understood at last that his own army could not be relied upon to support him. Not only those forces in the north and west who had not yet answered the call upon them, but even those now gathered about him in the southern camp. Particularly his Lieutenant-General Churchill, still there, still quietly attentive, obedient, correct, but utterly withdrawn.

Feversham and his brother implored the King to act, to place Churchill under arrest, to lock up his dangerous wife with her evil influences upon his daughter, the Princess Anne. James hesitated and was lost.

Two days after the Commander-in-Chief had failed to move the King, John sent to Sarah a message to carry out at once the plans he had prepared for her safety and that of the Princess Anne. He had made these plans well in advance; had even devised a secret exit from the Cockpit where Anne and Sarah were still in residence. Prince George of Denmark was at Salisbury with the King.

The two women moved at once. They left the Cockpit secretly at night to take refuge with the Bishop of London in the City. From there they set out in daylight for Lord Dorset's house, Copt Hall, in Epping Forest. On the next day after that they travelled to Nottingham where they were safe in the charge of the Duke of Devonshire. Prince George, who had already gone to Salisbury with his father-in-law, deserted to Prince William a little later.

Having sent his message to Sarah, John, on the following night, collected together the Duke of Grafton and a few other officers, with about four hundred Dragoons. They rode off without any kind of interference to join William at Exeter, arriving on the next day in the afternoon.

Churchill had dared greatly in staying so long with the King. When he made his submission to the Prince of Orange, William told him so.

'My lord, I do not pretend to hide my great anxiety these last days that your plans could miscarry and I should lose your most valuable support at this critical time.'

'It was no easy decision to make, your Highness.' John told him. 'As I have written to his Majesty, my care for his royal

person hath not diminished. My Faith dictated my desertion, but I remain ever grateful to my lifelong patron.'

William accepted this declaration as true and honest. Lord Churchill had indeed betrayed his King, with a final sudden and secret desertion for which no doubt he would be everlastingly condemned. But it was inevitable and totally in keeping with the man's character and genuis. For that had ruled him in the end, had dictated the precise, correct, brilliantly successful handling of the whole delicate operation. With such a man in his service, the Prince of Orange saw his own careful, clever way to a bloodless usurpation of the English throne.

When the revolution was achieved, when the King had followed his Queen and the baby Prince out of the country, Churchill was given leave to go to his wife. Prince George of Denmark had already arranged for the Princess Anne to return to the Cockpit and renew her acquaintance with her brother-in-law before her sister Mary arrived to take her place on the throne by right of succession.

Sarah, with characteristic vigour made light of her adventure in escaping from the late King's wrath.

'Her Highness was quite terrified,' she said laughing. 'She appealed to the Queen, who had always borne a soft spot in her Italian heart for her poor step-daughter, whose misfortune in the matter of breeding so matched her own. So we gained a brief delay and it was enough.'

'You came to no harm that night? Climbing the ladder from the Cockpit to my Lord Dorset's lodgings?'

'No indeed. For my lord was there to help us and Bishop Compton, who had been in hiding, to hurry us through the mud in Pall Mall, where poor Mrs. Morley lost the heel of a shoe and Mrs. Freeman one shoe entire.'

John embraced and kissed her. He was proud of her achievement and her manner of describing it.

'Oh my love, my love!' he cried. 'Thou should'st have been a man, a soldier after my own heart!'

'Truly, my lord? Then what of our love? I never knew your inclinations lay in that direction! Man, indeed!'

'A pox on your filthy wit! My wish was in proper jest! Beware I do not punish you for a coarse harlot!'

They had been apart for much of the time since their stay in

Bath. Though John spoke lightly Sarah realised the nervous irritability behind the words. She knew she had it in her to give him strength, she must prove to him that she could also give him peace. She must show him that he had every reason to rejoice that she was all woman. She succeeded without any great effort of her strong will.

For John was slow to recover from his final act of desertion, however right and far-seeing he knew it to be. Sarah gave him relief from tension, confidence for the future.

'You are my life, my dearest,' he told her after one of their many renewals of their love. 'When I knew you must be in danger I feared and sweated for you far more than for myself, though at the end my life for days lay in one word, one turn of the King's hand. I served him faithfully. I even loved him when he took me as his page to watch his soldiers drilling and marching.'

'It was the soldiers you loved, and always did so.'

He disregarded her interruption. 'My father loved them both, Charles and James alike, seeing no real faults in either. Until that last time he sat in the Commons and spoke up for grants for old soldiers. And James refused in anger and contempt and dissolved that parliament. The old man never forgave that. But I am glad he died before the Prince left Holland.'

'And you left James. But Sir Winston would have understood you—that your Faith came first.'

'He knew me,' John said very seriously. 'He would have thought I betrayed my profession.'

'Whereas only now can your profession come to full bloom,' she insisted, boldly and with truth.

'Oh Sarah, Sarah, I adore you!' he whispered. 'I shall love you and you only, to the end of my days.'

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